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**Spain and British Decadence, 1880-1920:**

**Aesthetics of Extremes**

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Birkbeck College, University of London

Submitted for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy, January 2018

I declare that all of the work presented in this thesis is my own.

Leire Barrera-Medrano

January 2018

### **Abstract**

This thesis uncovers the role played by Spain in the articulation of British Decadence from the 1880s to the 1910s. It examines chronologically the reception of Spanish aesthetics by four authors linked to Decadence: Vernon Lee (Violet Paget, 1856–1935), Oscar Wilde (1854–1900), Arthur Symonds (1865–1945) and Michael Field (Katharine Bradley, 1846–1914, and Edith Cooper, 1862–1913). It contends that British Decadent writers found in Spain — its culture, history and landscape — an ‘aesthetics of extremes’ that enabled them to test out artistic boundaries beyond and against their own dominant culture. Drawing on extensive archival and primary material, and working through theories of excess, I suggest that Spanish aesthetics seemed to embody spaces of extremity where artistic dissidence and experimentation were possible. For British Decadent writers, Spanish aesthetics were appealing because they exceeded the limits of moderation. Away from the perceived mundane and oppressive environment of Victorian middle-class, industrial Britain, Spain represented the heightened sensations of Catholic rituals, Baroque paintings of the grotesque, and the erotics of Gypsy dancing and mysticism. I ultimately argue that, as opposed to other encounters with Spanish culture, British Decadent writers’ engagement with Spain does not only involve projection onto another culture, but also a dynamic reshaping of the discourses of Decadence. The ‘extreme’ tendencies of Spain and its culture became a central aesthetic value for many Decadent writers.



## Acknowledgements

My thanks go first and foremost to my supervisor, Ana Parejo Vadillo, for her support and her generative and invaluable ideas, and for sharing my passion for this project from the beginning. Looking at Velázquez's 'pale evil King' in the National Gallery, as Wilde did, was the perfect conclusion to this journey. Also to the Birkbeck Centre for Nineteenth-Century Studies, and to the Department of English and Humanities at Birkbeck, most especially to the best of Arts administrators, Anthony Shepherd, without whom the completion of this thesis would certainly have been bumpier. Vicky Mills generously gave her time and feedback on my second chapter.

I am most grateful to Jane Desmarais (Goldsmiths), who has encouraged me more than she probably knows and who has made this thesis richer with her stimulating conversations on Decadence, Symons, and life. There is not enough room here to thank the Fernández-Giménez family as they ought to be thanked. Finding them was the best hunch I have ever followed. I hope their tremendous generosity, and their humanity, is palpable throughout this project, most prominently in the chapter on Vernon Lee. Being able to create and make use of the Fernández-Giménez archive (USA) was only possible thanks to their financial and personal support. The College of Liberal Arts at Colorado State University, Fort Collins, hosted me in 2015 and allowed me to meet fantastic scholars (María del Mar López Cabrales and Ellen Brinks).

This thesis makes use of extensive archival materials from the Vernon Lee Collection at Colby College (USA); the Gray & Raffalovich Collection at the National Library of Scotland (UK); the Vernon Lee Collection at Somerville College (UK); the Arthur Symons Collection at Princeton University (USA); and The British Library (UK). The archivists and librarians have been immensely helpful. My thanks also to Shafquat Towheed for introducing me to Vernon Lee, and to the International Vernon Lee Society for the invitation to the University of La Réunion in 2017, which proved to be an enriching experience, none more so than meeting the wonderful Sally Blackburn. I am indebted to fellow PhD students and academics that I have met at conferences over the last four years, whose insights have inevitably worked their way through this thesis. Most especially, at the 'Michael Field Centenary' (2014), 'Aestheticism and Decadence in the Age of Modernism' (2015), 'London Victorian Studies Colloquium' (2015), 'Forgotten Geographies in the *Fin de Siècle*' (2016) and 'Arthur Symons at the *Fin de Siècle*' (2017).

My heartfelt thanks to Naomi Hetherington, a generous friend who gave me useful and pertinent advice on my final chapter, and to Rebecka Klette and Katharina Herold, for their solidarity, advice, and Decadent support. I am forever grateful for the never-ending energy and encouragement of my wonderful friends, Rita Álvarez Tudela and Ángela Lavilla Cañedo. To Sasha Dovzhyk, my dearest friend and my never-ever forgotten geography — thank you so much. Sasha and Rebecka also proofread parts of this thesis, and Dan all of it.

This is for my Mother, always and beyond, and for David. Also for my Father, who has always challenged me. My *abuela* María, who could barely read but knew St Teresa's works by heart, is the presiding spirit of this thesis. Above all, thanks to Dan, whose questions and over-the-top comments have enhanced this project. He has always understood, and most importantly encouraged, my Spanish extremes.

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## Introduction: Aesthetics of Extremes

In Goya we see both extremes, the whole gamut from wild gaiety to sombre horror of the Spanish temperament.<sup>1</sup>

Arthur Symons (1901)

Certainly it is necessary for me to go to the extreme limit, to what one would perhaps call mysticism, and that I have tried to designate through St John of the Cross. When I say to the limit, I mean two extremes.<sup>2</sup>

Georges Bataille (1961)

In October 1891 one of the champions of British Decadence, Arthur Symons (1865–1945), invited his fellow author Michael Field — the pseudonym used by Katharine Bradley (1846–1914) and her niece Edith Cooper (1862–1913) — to a London concert of the Spanish violinist Pablo Sarasate (1844–1908):<sup>3</sup>

Meanwhile, have you ever heard Sarasate? If not, you have yet to know what music may be. I am going to his first concert on Saturday at 3 at St James Hall, will you come? It is worth a journey five times the length of yours [...] will you come?<sup>4</sup>

The subject of this letter — Pablo Sarasate — is not tangential, but essential to its effusiveness. Widely recognised as a major musician across Europe, and the subject of Whistler's portrait *Arrangement in Black: Portrait of Señor Pablo de Sarasate* (1884), this Spanish violinist was, for Symons, 'essentially the representative of all

<sup>1</sup> Arthur Symons, 'The Painters of Seville', *Cities and Sea-Coasts and Islands* (London: W. Collins, 1918), p. 25. This essay was written in 1899, but first published in January 1901 in the *Fortnightly Review*, and then reprinted in *Cities and Sea-Coasts and Islands*.

<sup>2</sup> Georges Bataille, 'Interview with Madeleine Chapsal', in *Essential Writings* (London: SAGE, 1998), p. 222.

<sup>3</sup> Decadence and Decadent are capitalised throughout this thesis when I use them to refer to the movement and its authors, rather than the generic terms 'decadence' and 'decadent'.

<sup>4</sup> Arthur Symons to Edith Cooper, [17 October 1891], British Library, Add. MS 46867, fols. 256–257.

that is novel and troubled in the modern world.’<sup>5</sup> Symons would publish a lavish article on Sarasate in the *Illustrated London News* (21 November 1891) in which he linked his allure as a symbol of the modern world to his Spanish origin: ‘Those fantastic dances, with their broken rhythm, their pizzicato effects, their bizarre alternations of tone, are not compositions made for our astonishment, but the real national dances, as one hears them in the south of Spain, only more acute, more intense, more significant,’ wrote Symons of Sarasate’s music.<sup>6</sup>

For Symons, Sarasate’s Spanish music had ‘a passionate intensity’ that crossed a threshold, or a limit of perception: no violin sang ‘with so strange an acuteness’, became ‘so haunting a voice, so pathetic a lyrical cry.’<sup>7</sup> The repetitive use of the adverb ‘so’ bestows a sense of excess on Sarasate’s violin, which is replicated in both Symons’ invitation to Michael Field and in his review of the Spanish musician. The unrestrained emotion of Symons’ invitation to Bradley and Cooper is contained in the double repetition ‘will you come? [...] will you come?’ and in the persistent hyperbolic expressions: ‘it is worth a journey five times the length of yours’. Likewise, in his review Symons exclaimed unapologetically ‘But those fingers! Never were there such fingers since Paganini!’ after declaring that ‘there is apparently nothing that Sarasate cannot do.’<sup>8</sup> Above all, Sarasate’s violin produced intense emotions at the limits of perception: it induced ‘a heavenly trill’ that progressively became ‘piercing [...] almost an agony’; it was ‘the art of sensation sharpened to the point of morbid acuteness.’<sup>9</sup> The intensity of his music was Sarasate’s appeal, ‘and Sarasate alone among musicians’, underscored Symons.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Arthur Symons, ‘Sarasate: An Appreciation’, *Illustrated London News*, 21 November 1891, p. 658.

<sup>6</sup> Symons, ‘Sarasate: An Appreciation’, p. 658.

<sup>7</sup> Symons, ‘Sarasate: An Appreciation’, p. 658.

<sup>8</sup> Symons, ‘Sarasate: An Appreciation’, p. 658.

<sup>9</sup> Symons, ‘Sarasate: An Appreciation’, p. 658.

<sup>10</sup> Symons, ‘Sarasate: An Appreciation’, p. 658.

Symons' reception of Sarasate's music aptly illustrates the contention of this thesis: British writers associated with the Decadent style found in Spain — its culture, history and landscape — an aesthetics of extremes that enabled them to test out artistic boundaries beyond and against their own dominant culture. What this thesis terms Spain's 'aesthetics of extremes' informed and shaped the imagination and the fictional and non-fictional texts of a group of authors who rebelled against the moral code of the Victorian bourgeoisie. I argue that for British Decadent writers, Spanish aesthetics were appealing because they exceeded the limits of moderation imposed by Victorian morality. This aesthetics seemed to embody spaces of extremity where artistic dissidence and experimentation were possible.

Indeed, Spain appears in the texts of British Decadent writers as a locus of extremes, of intense anguish and intense delight, a sort of internal transgression of Victorian decorum. Away from the perceived mundane and oppressive environment of Victorian middle-class Britain, Spain represented the heightened sensations of Catholic rituals, Baroque paintings of the grotesque, and the erotics of Gypsy dancing and mysticism. In particular, this thesis shows how four authors associated with Decadence received and reproduced what they sensed as this Spanish 'culture of extremes' in the period that extends from the 1880s to the 1910s. Vernon Lee (Violet Page, 1856–1935) wrote about the 'all or nothing' nature of Spain, and Oscar Wilde (1854–1900) of the 'sombre splendour' and the 'ostentatious ugliness' of the Spanish characters portrayed by the painter Diego Velázquez (1599–1660).<sup>11</sup> Arthur Symons referred to the 'extremes' of the Spanish temperament as encompassing the 'whole gamut from wild gaiety to sombre horror', and Michael Field delighted in the 'full of

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<sup>11</sup> Vernon Lee, *The Sentimental Traveller: Notes on Places* (London: John Lane, The Bodley Head, 1908), p. ix; Oscar Wilde, 'The Birthday of the Infanta', *A House of Pomegranates* (London: James R. Osgood McIlvaine, 1891), p. 30; p. 45.

fire' religious verse of the sixteenth-century Spanish mystics.<sup>12</sup> For these authors, Spain gradually became the locus of excess and of the violent grotesque (Vernon Lee and Oscar Wilde) and of perverse pleasure (Arthur Symons and Michael Field).

Focusing on specific authors, this thesis is also conceived as a chronological exploration of the wide range of forms in which British writers engaged with and represented Spain: it works through some of the blurred, porous aesthetic categories that pertain to British *fin-de-siècle* culture — namely Aestheticism, Impressionism, Symbolism and proto-Modernism, under the wider umbrella of Decadence — through Spain. At the same time, I reverse this approach, by mapping the ways in which these aesthetic categories were changed by the discursive and experiential elements of Spain. The extremes that Decadent writers found in aesthetic categories such as Moorish Spain, Catholic Spain, Baroque Spain, black Spain, flamenco Gypsy Spain, mystic Spain and intellectual Spain pressured and altered Decadent discourses.

Before expanding on the theoretical framework of this thesis, the definition of the term 'extreme' clarifies the twofold dimension of its conceptual direction. 'Extreme' is related to the idea of excess: 'The utmost imaginable or tolerable degree of anything; a very high degree.' 'Extreme' also relates to the theory of opposites held in tension: 'The utmost point or verge; that which terminates a body; an end, extremity' and 'That which occupies a place at either end of anything; one of two things removed as far as possible from each other, in position, nature, or condition.'<sup>13</sup> Both notions — excess and extremity — are intrinsically intertwined: something is extreme in relation to or compared with another thing.

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<sup>12</sup> Symons, 'The Painters of Seville', p. 25; Katharine Bradley to John Gray, [c. 1909], National Library of Scotland, Gray & Raffalovich, Dep. 372, N17.

<sup>13</sup> *Oxford English Dictionary* [online], 'Extreme', <http://www.oed.com/view/Entry/67168?redirectedFrom=extreme> [accessed 18 May 2017].

This conception is linked in this thesis to some of Georges Bataille's ideas. Bataille's attraction to extremes — to the intimate connection between the sacred and the profane, between waste and luxury, between filth and beauty, and violence and eroticism — the allure of what Bataille calls 'heterology' or the 'science of what is completely other', has partially Spanish roots.<sup>14</sup> Bataille was explicit that his time in Spain as a student in 1922 had a profound impact on his thinking.<sup>15</sup> For Bataille, Spanish art forms including poetry, flamenco art, and bullfighting exhibited a heightened sense of 'anguished pleasure' through which, as David F. Richter notes, one could experience 'a brand of ecstasy linked with death'.<sup>16</sup> This aesthetics of 'anguished pleasure' — of extremes — sensed by Bataille in Spain in the early 1920s provided, indeed, the foundation for theoretical components of his writing.

As mentioned above, this Bataillean aesthetics of Spanish 'anguished pleasure' is attached to his concept of 'heterology': an anthropology of the excessive, the theory and practice of the heterogeneous object. Very briefly, as I will further explain this notion in my methodology section, a Bataillean heterogeneous world includes everything irrational, excessive, and 'rejected by homogeneous society as waste'.<sup>17</sup> This heterogeneous world is characterised by 'the opposition of two extreme forms': 'there is an identity of opposites between glory and dejection, between exalted and imperative (higher) forms and impoverished (lower) forms.'<sup>18</sup> Both extremes prompt

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<sup>14</sup> Georges Bataille, *Visions of Excess: Selected Writings, 1927–1939*, ed. by Allan Stoekl, trans. by Allan Stoekl with Carl R. Lovitt and Donald M. Leslie Jr (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1985), p. 102.

<sup>15</sup> For a more detailed analysis of the influence of Spain on Bataille's thinking see, for example, Denis Hollier, *Against Architecture: The Writings of Georges Bataille* (Cambridge: MIT, 1992); David F. Richter, *García Lorca at the Edge of Surrealism* (Lanham: Bucknell University Press, 2014); and Anne C. McConnell, 'Spain and the Ritual of Transgression in Georges Bataille's *Histoire de l'Oeil*', *Transitions: Journal of Franco-Iberian Studies*, 2, (2006), 35–47.

<sup>16</sup> Georges Bataille, 'A propos de "Pour qui sonne le glas?" d'Ernest Hemingway', in *Actualité: 'L'Espagne Libre'*, ed. by Georges Bataille (Paris: Calmann-Lévy, 1946), p. 122. My translation from the French: 'Du plaisir angoissé'; Richter, p. 11.

<sup>17</sup> Bataille, *Visions of Excess*, p. 142.

<sup>18</sup> Bataille, *Visions of Excess*, pp. 144–45.



a harrowing awe, a feeling of both attraction and repulsion. Coming from the perceived ‘homogeneous’ world of middle-class Victorian Britain, Decadent writers found a sort of heterogeneous world in Spain, a world of extremes that inspired attraction that was simultaneous with repulsion, and which energised their writing. This thesis shows how Decadence actively looked to this Spanish aesthetics of extremes, finding in it an allegorical space of experimentation, dissidence and innovation.

From the cosmopolitan perspective of Decadence, the reception and reproduction of Spain is equally decisive. The Francophilia of the *fin-de-siècle* British literary avant-garde is well-established by now.<sup>19</sup> Yet, what has been repeatedly neglected in British studies of Decadence is the *espagnolisme* of nineteenth-century France, which, in turn, had a crucial impact on British culture. Spain has also been occluded in the transcultural studies that have appeared in recent years as part of a growing, and timely, interest in the cosmopolitan, transnational and global character of literary Decadence. Tracing the intersection between Spain and Britain during the *fin de siècle* is not only an important yet unexplored dimension of both nations’ shared cultural history, but also of international and cosmopolitan cultural discourses. This critical neglect needs to be urgently readdressed, work which this thesis carries out.

The ways in which Decadent writers thought of, experienced and wrote about Spain make this geocultural space particularly fruitful for our understanding of Decadence, cosmopolitanism, and occasionally Orientalism: at the turn of the nineteenth century, Spain was a former empire in decline, and a country at the southern

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<sup>19</sup> See, for example, Jean Pierrot, *The Decadent Imagination* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1981); Matthew Sturgis, *Passionate Attitudes: The English Decadence of the 1890s* (London: Macmillan, 1995); Kirsten MacLeod, *Fictions of British Decadence: High Art, Popular Writing and the Fin De Siècle* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2006); and *Decadence: An Annotated Anthology*, ed. by Jane Desmarais and Chris Baldick (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2012).

boundary of Europe whose Islamic past tested the constraints of the East-West binary. For this reason, the post-colonial theories of Edward Said, Homi Bhabha and others invariably inform my analysis as they must, but they are not my principal theoretical focus. Nonetheless, Bhabha's concept of the 'in-between' enlightens some of the complex relationships between cosmopolitan Decadents and Orientalism that are at the heart of the Decadent conceptualisation of Spain.<sup>20</sup> The discursively constructed boundaries between East and West are not absolute in Spain. Rather, continuing with Bhabha, 'these "in-between" spaces provide the terrain for elaborating strategies of selfhood — singular or communal — that initiate new signs of identity, and innovative sites of collaboration and contestation, in the act of defining the idea of society itself.'<sup>21</sup>

Thus, while British Decadents did project primitivist and Orientalist ideas of otherness onto Spain as geography and as culture, in this thesis I principally argue that these forms of discursive construction were countered by the way Spain refracted the aesthetic practices of Decadence. As opposed to other encounters with Spanish culture, the relationship of British Decadent writers with Spain does not only involve projection onto another culture, but also a dynamic reshaping of the discourses of Decadence. In the following chapters, I will demonstrate how the extremes of Spain persist as operative elements in many works of Decadent literature and as popular models for the Decadent lifestyle.

Alongside France, it is also commonplace to suggest that Decadent writers turned their eyes to the Roman Empire, finding in its decay a source of inspiration.<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> Homi K. Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (London: Routledge, 1994), p. 1.

<sup>21</sup> Bhabha, p. 1.

<sup>22</sup> See, for example, Matthew Potolsky, *The Decadent Republic of Letters: Taste, Politics, and Cosmopolitan Community from Baudelaire to Beardsley* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2012), and Desmarais and Baldick (2012).

Yet, it has not been acknowledged that, at the historical moment when Britain's imperial pre-eminence was beginning to be challenged, Decadent writers also turned to the 'history of decay' of another former empire, Spain, to inform their works. Three periods of decline proved especially fruitful for British Decadents: the last phase of the 800-year Muslim rule over Spain (suggestive of intellectual ferment and Oriental sensuality); the late Spanish Golden Age (which during the seventeenth century saw the decline of Hapsburg rule and the beginning of the end of the once foremost global power); and contemporary late nineteenth-century Spain, which was going through a profound moral, political, and social crisis due to the loss of its last colonies. These narratives of decay in Spanish history served British Decadents as a prism through which they were able to refract aesthetic and social concerns of their own cultural and historical moments. But before I consider the specific delineations of Spain in British Decadence, and discuss the key terminology attached to it more fully, a brief overview of Anglo-Spanish encounters in the nineteenth century is in order.

### **Towards New Aesthetics: Retracing British *espagnolisme***

In the preface to the 1937 edition of *The Soul of Spain* (first published in 1908), the physician and sexologist Havelock Ellis (1859–1939) recalled his first visit to Spain in the spring of 1891, accompanied by Arthur Symonds, 'moved by I know not now what expectation of a strange land.'<sup>23</sup> This strangeness, mystery and 'romantic spirit' of Spain was undoubtedly the driving force of that first trip.<sup>24</sup> The Decadent encounter with Spain is, indeed, partly a product of the Romantic tradition, both British and

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<sup>23</sup> Havelock Ellis, *The Soul of Spain* (London: Constable, 1937), p. vi.

<sup>24</sup> Havelock Ellis, *The Soul of Spain* (London: Constable, 1908), p. 20.

French. Before the nineteenth century, Britain and Spain had often been enemies, an enmity that was the product of religious differences and power struggles for the control of American and European territories. The myth of the Black Legend — a term used by scholars to describe the anti-Spanish historical propaganda created by writers of rival powers since the sixteenth century — was deeply present.<sup>25</sup> In Britain, Spain was invariably considered a threatening power, a stronghold of Catholicism, a bastion of cruelty, or more often than not as simply unknown — and therefore frightening. Spanish backwardness and superstition had been attacked by Enlightenment Europe, and, since Spain had not been included in the Grand Tour, it remained, as John Pemble notes, ‘unsanctioned by habit and convention’.<sup>26</sup>

Whereas Enlightenment Britain had shown little interest in Spain, Romantic Britain found in Spain an appealing, singular and mysterious country. Indeed, in the early nineteenth century, Spanish culture accrued both increasing topicality and resonance in Britain. The years between 1808 and 1812 witnessed a massive British emotional, military and financial investment in Spain because of the common cause against Bonapartism, forging a kind of mutual respect and sentimental belief that united both nations. It has even been suggested that, during those years, Spain and Britain were interconnected more than ever before the age of Philip II (1527–1598) and more than ever afterwards until the present.<sup>27</sup> In other words, in the early nineteenth century, Spain re-appeared in Britain as a prominent cultural geography.

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<sup>25</sup> The Spanish Inquisition has been one of the main subjects of the Black Legend since its origin. For a fuller discussion of the Black Legend, both in Europe and in England, see, for example, Julián Juderías y Loyot, *La leyenda negra y la verdad histórica* (Madrid: Revista de Archivos, Bibliotecas y Museos, 1914); William S. Maltby, *The Black Legend in England: The Development of Anti-Spanish Sentiment, 1558–1660* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1971); and Henry Arthur Francis Kamen, *Spain's Road to Empire: The Making of a World Power, 1492–1763* (London: Penguin, 2003).

<sup>26</sup> John Pemble, *The Mediterranean Passion: Victorians and Edwardians in the South* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1987), p. 48.

<sup>27</sup> Diego Saglia, *Poetic Castles in Spain: British Romanticism and Figurations of Iberia* (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2000), p. 11.

In his groundbreaking study of Spain and British Romanticism, Diego Saglia has shown how British culture of the Romantic period was distinguished by a lasting and diverse interest in Spain. From the Peninsular conflict of the 1800s through to the Carlist wars of the 1830s, events in Spain were discussed in Parliament, and were the subject of practical intervention (with the involvement of the British military) and of literary endeavour. Things Spanish attracted the attention of many, varied writers — Byron, Wordsworth, Coleridge, Shelley, Landon, Southey, Hemans. The Peninsular War thus initiated a strong interest in Spain in the nineteenth century. There was an increase in published accounts of war veterans' experiences in Spain, Winston Pertaub observes, that heightened 'people's curiosity about the country' and fuelled 'many British readers with a desire to visit the sites where their compatriots had excelled'.<sup>28</sup> In the years following the war, knowledge and enthusiasm for Spain were further increased in Britain by the number of Spanish political exiles.<sup>29</sup> This period also saw the creation (largely French, as I explore more fully below) of the myth of Romantic Spain, an exotic land peopled by idealised Gypsies, Moorish relics, bandits, beggars, bullfighters, and passionate women.

This fascination with all things Spanish continued to build during the rest of the nineteenth century, driven by three main factors: the creation of collections of Spanish art (both private and public); a burgeoning interest in Spanish history; and the growth of travel literature. Many of the well-known clichés about Spain were indeed coined by mid-century adventure travellers, who depicted an 'unspoiled' and exotic Spain. George Borrow's popular travel-histories, *The Bible in Spain* (1843) and *The Zincali, or Account of the Gipsies in Spain* (1841), and Richard Ford's *Hand-Book for*

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<sup>28</sup> Winston Pertaub, 'Spain, Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries', in *Literature of Travel and Exploration: An Encyclopedia*, ed. by Jennifer Speake, (Abingdon: Routledge, 2003), p. 1117.

<sup>29</sup> The Spanish Romantic writers José de Espronceda (1808–1842), Francisco Martínez de la Rosa (1787–1862) and Ángel de Saavedra Duke of Rivas (1791–1865), among others.

*Travellers in Spain and Readers at Home* (1845), which enjoyed huge success, presented a stereotypically Victorian updating of the Black Legend.<sup>30</sup> Prejudices about staunchly Catholic Spain were confirmed by reading the story of Borrow's travels to the Peninsula, trying to interest people in buying Protestant bibles, and the scrapes which befell him. Borrow described Spain as 'the land of wonder and mystery [...] the most magnificent country in the world' where 'amongst much that is lamentable and reprehensible, I have found much that is noble and to be admired.'<sup>31</sup> Richard Ford also demonstrated a sincere fascination with a culture that, nonetheless, he described from the standpoint of a confident and superior culture, with smugness and condescension. Victorian British writers, almost invariably, approached the Peninsula from an imperial perspective; 'political, economic, and cultural power had shifted to the North, and the North was now encroaching on the South.'<sup>32</sup>

Many of these perceptions are collected in David Howarth's volume on the cultural relations between Britain and Spain during 1770–1870.<sup>33</sup> Howarth's work captures the essence of the Spanish Black Legend during the period, replete with images of an atavistic, stagnant country that stood in stark contrast to economic successes like Britain. The book is of great interest because its subject had been largely ignored by other historians, but it is at times reductive in scope and content, especially from a literary perspective. After stating that 'in literature Byron was much taken with Spain, and Disraeli enjoyed finding copy for his novels in the louche and perfumed interiors of Seville', Howarth concludes that 'Spain did not provide that rich a vein of

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<sup>30</sup> For more on Borrow and Ford in Spain see, for example, *El bisturí inglés: Literatura de viajes e hispanismo en lengua inglesa*, ed. by Carmelo Medina Casado and José Ruiz Mas (Jaén: Servicio de Publicaciones de la Universidad de Jaén, 2004), and Ian Robertson, *Richard Ford 1796-1858: Hispanophile, Connoisseur and Critic* (Norwich: Michael Russell, 2004).

<sup>31</sup> George Borrow, *The Bible in Spain*, 3 vols (London: J. Murray, 1843), i, p. xii.

<sup>32</sup> Pemble, p. 228.

<sup>33</sup> David Howarth, *The Invention of Spain: Anglo-Spanish Cultural Relations, 1770-1870* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2007).

ore for the British literary mind' during the nineteenth century.<sup>34</sup> Saglia's volume, mentioned above, contradicts this statement, at least with regard to the first quarter of the century. As for the 1830s onwards, Howarth's observations are partly accurate in that many Victorian writers — certainly not all — suspected Spain's association with the excesses of Romantic sensibility, and were not interested in treating Spain in their works. Yet Howarth omits some crucial examples that invalidate the above, such as the importance of Spain in George Eliot's work, reflected in her longest poem 'The Spanish Gypsy' (1868) and *Daniel Deronda* (1876).<sup>35</sup>

The view that British writers were not drawn to Spanish culture, or that they did not offer new perspectives on the country during the mid and late nineteenth century has long been replicated by other scholars. Pertaub, for example, has argued that the majority of Victorian travel writers' accounts 'provide a wearisome repetition of observations already recorded by Ford and Borrow'.<sup>36</sup> He also considers that, after Ford and Borrow, the next important generation of travellers to Spain emerged only in the period stretching from the end of the First World War to the outbreak of the Spanish Civil War in 1936, thus dismissing some of the works that this thesis examines. Alan Braham has also claimed that 'the scarcity of references to [Spanish] painting by major British authors is striking in comparison with the visual responsiveness of the French, from Balzac to Proust' and of Americans, such as Henry James.<sup>37</sup> This statement is confronted in the second chapter of this thesis, which

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<sup>34</sup> Howarth, p. xi.

<sup>35</sup> For more on George Eliot and Spain see, for example, Bonnie McMullen, "'The Interest of Spanish Sights': From Ronda to *Daniel Deronda*" in *George Eliot and Europe*, ed. by John Rignall (London: Routledge, 1997).

<sup>36</sup> Pertaub, 'Spain, Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries', pp. 1117–18.

<sup>37</sup> Allan Braham, *El Greco to Goya: The Taste for Spanish Paintings in Britain and Ireland* (London: National Gallery Publications, 1981), p. 37.

reconstructs the importance of the Spanish painter Diego Velázquez's aesthetics for Decadent writing.

What has been called the 'cult of Velázquez' represented a paradigm shift in the prominence of Spanish culture in British painting, and in British literature. As Hilary Macartney notes, for most of the Victorian period, the art of Spain was indeed associated in British minds 'with an extreme form of naturalism', darkness and refusal to idealise.<sup>38</sup> There was a general belief that the majority of the Spanish art was commissioned by the Roman Catholic Church, which was also 'undoubtedly the greatest obstacle to British appreciation of Spanish art'.<sup>39</sup> Such 'menace of darkness' in Victorian minds prompted art critics such as John Ruskin to claim 'the moral inferiority of the Spanish school, especially compared with lighter-toned, pre-Catholic Reformation paintings by Italian artists'.<sup>40</sup> In 1853, for instance, Ruskin lamented the Spanish painter Bartolomé Esteban Murillo's (1617–1682) depiction of 'repulsive and wicked children' as 'mere delight in foulness'.<sup>41</sup> The Irish writer and critic Anna Jameson (1794–1860) had also noted in 1844 that 'many Spanish pictures together oppress the spirits', and that the 'gloomy monotony of the [Spanish] subjects, and yet more of the treatment', was 'painful and fatiguing'.<sup>42</sup> These views echo some of the ideas presented in the first chapter of this thesis, which examines Vernon Lee's multifaceted relationship to Spanish culture. Lee's negative views on Spanish art and aesthetics illustrate a clear shift in British literary reception of Spanish culture.

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<sup>38</sup> Hilary Macartney, 'The British "Discovery" of Spanish Golden Age Art', in *The Discovery of Spain: British Artists and Collectors: Goya to Picasso* (Edinburgh: National Galleries of Scotland, 2009), p. 84.

<sup>39</sup> Macartney, p. 84.

<sup>40</sup> Macartney, p. 84.

<sup>41</sup> John Ruskin, *The Stones of Venice*, 3 vols (London: Smith, Elder, 1851–1853), ii (1853), pp. 193–94.

<sup>42</sup> Anna Jameson, *Companion to the Most Celebrated Private Galleries of Art in London* (London: Saunders and Otley, 1844), p. 178.



Partially reflecting the views of Ruskin, the most prominent patron of the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood, John Everett Millais (1829–1896) resisted the *espagnolisme* that was to overwhelm late nineteenth-century British painting. Although Millais admired Velázquez (he produced his own ‘Homage to Velasquez’ in 1868), he expressed in 1892 the view that ‘it is worse than folly for young men to say [...] as many do, that Velasquez is the only Old Master worth looking at.’<sup>43</sup> Robert Alan Mowbray (R.A.M.) Stevenson (1847–1900), leader of a new school of art criticism in Britain, lamented the hostility of the Pre-Raphaelites to Spanish painting and to Velázquez and pointed to a new appreciation of the Spanish painter’s aesthetics: ‘two hundred years after he had shown the mystery of light as God made it, we still hear that Velasquez was a sordid soul who never saw beauty, a mere master of technique, wholly lacking in imagination. So say those whose necks are stiff with looking at Italy and Raphael.’<sup>44</sup> Stevenson thus placed Velázquez and Spanish painting at the centre of a *fin-de-siècle* aesthetic debate between the Establishment and the new trends. Crucially, Stevenson also compared the Pre-Raphaelites’ reception of Velázquez to the response of the Impressionists in France: ‘he [Velázquez] could scarcely be expected to sympathise with the art of Raphael; and his outspokenness has been amply repaid in all ages by the frank dislike of all Raphaelites for his own work.’<sup>45</sup> English teaching, he continued, ‘has been contrary to impressionism and Velasquez has not been sufficiently, or at any rate rightly, admired.’<sup>46</sup>

Millais and Stevenson were undoubtedly alluding to the feeling of a group of younger artists in Britain that had turned to Paris ‘for lessons in paint handling, in

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<sup>43</sup> M[arion] H Spielmann, ‘A Talk with Sir John Everett Millais, Bart., R. A.’, *Black and White*, 17 November 1892, pp. 326–27.

<sup>44</sup> R. A. M. Stevenson, *The Art of Velasquez* (London: George Bell, 1895), p. 3.

<sup>45</sup> Stevenson, p. 96.

<sup>46</sup> Stevenson, p. 123.

“plain-air” colour values, and in commitment to observed naturalism.’<sup>47</sup> In Paris, they frequented cafes and studios where one of the pivotal figures in the transition from Realism to Impressionism, Edouard Manet, recounted his experience of Spanish art. Manet was the greatest disciple of the Spanish School and in particular of Velázquez in France. Manet’s association with Spain was so great that Baudelaire said in 1862 that, with him, ‘Spanish genius has taken refuge in France.’<sup>48</sup> The French Impressionists (and the British painters that would later emulate this school) found in Spanish art a way of undermining the formal rigidities of classicism, and as such served as an example of ways in which to paint modern life. In line with the plurality of interactions between the arts in the *fin de siècle*, Spanish culture would have an equally important role to play in the shift to the new aesthetic preoccupations of British writers at the turn of the century. Much *fin-de-siècle* literature took indeed its inspiration and manner from other artistic media, particularly from painting and music. British authors sought effects similar to those of the French Impressionists, reflecting in their work the subjects and manners of painters, including Spanish landscape and culture.

The British reception of French culture at the end of the century, then, played a decisive role in how British Decadent writers understood and reimagined Spain. To a large extent, France mediated Spain for British Decadence. In parallel to the Anglo-Spanish cultural relations described above, it is imperative to note that the nineteenth century has been described as the century of *espagnolisme*, a predominantly French

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<sup>47</sup> Paul Stirton, ‘The Cult of Velázquez’, in *The Discovery of Spain: British Artists and Collectors: Goya to Picasso* (Edinburgh: National Galleries of Scotland, 2009), p. 109.

<sup>48</sup> Charles Baudelaire, ‘Peintres et aquafortistes’, *Le Boulevard*, 14 September 1862, quoted in Carol Armstrong, *Manet Manette* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2002), p. 96: ‘M. Manet [...] et qui donnent à croire que la genie espagnole s’est réfugié en France’.

cultural trend that favoured Spanish topics.<sup>49</sup> The authoritative *Le trésor de la langue française* (TLF), a dictionary of nineteenth and twentieth-century French, defines *espagnolisme* as an ‘attitude or tendency favourable to Spain or having certain characteristics specifically Spanish’ and attributes the coining of the term to Stendhal’s *Vie de Henri Brulard* (written between 1835 and 1836 but only published posthumously in 1890).<sup>50</sup> The aftermath of the Napoleonic occupation prompted a generation of famous French visits to Spain, informed by a Romantic emotionalism and exoticism. Victor Hugo, Alfred de Musset and Prosper Mérimée, among many others, penned works inspired by their travels to the Peninsula.<sup>51</sup>

Together with Mérimée’s *Carmen* (1847), the major contributor to *espagnolisme* was Théophile Gautier’s *Voyage en Espagne* (1843). This work represents one of the most influential guides to Spain and Spanish art and culture for most of the later nineteenth century, both in France and in Britain. For Gautier, Spain promised the allure of an exotic and passionate culture; it emerged as a revelation.<sup>52</sup> Symons would replicate this sentiment when he wrote that he felt he had ‘broken ground’ when entering Spain for the first time in 1891.<sup>53</sup> The impact that Gautier exerted on Decadent writers like Symons at the turn of the century is well-known, but

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<sup>49</sup> See, for example, J.F. Schaub, *La France espagnole: Les racines hispaniques de l’absolutisme français* (Paris: PUF, 2003); Marie-Sofie Lundström, *Travelling in a Palimpsest: Finnish Nineteenth-Century Painters’ Encounters with Spanish Art and Culture* (Jyväskylä: Finnish Academy of Science and Letters, Humaniora: 2008); and Paul Stirton, ‘The Cult of Velázquez’, in *The Discovery of Spain: British Artists and Collectors: Goya to Picasso* (Edinburgh: National Galleries of Scotland, 2009).

<sup>50</sup> *Le trésor de la langue française* [online], ‘Espagnolisme’, <http://stella.atilf.fr/Dendien/scripts/tlfiv5/advanced.exe?8;s=3024845700>; [accessed 6 October 2017]. My translation from the French: ‘Attitude, tendance favorable aux Espagnols ou présentant certaines caractéristiques propres aux Espagnols.’

<sup>51</sup> For a more detailed discussion of French Romanticism and Spain see, for example, J.F. Schaub (2003), and C. W. Thompson, *French Romantic Travel Writing* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012).

<sup>52</sup> See Théophile Gautier, *Voyage en Espagne* (Paris: Laplace, Sanchez, 1843).

<sup>53</sup> In a letter to the Scottish writer Dykes Campbell, Arthur Symons wrote that ‘in Spain we only felt we have broken ground’. Symons to Campbell, 12 May [1891], British Library, Add. MS 49523, fols 193–194.

that it included an inherited French *espagnolisme* is not. Havelock Ellis' following words further testify to this notion:

It is highly instructive to-day [1908] to read Gautier's *Voyage en Espagne*. This book is much more than a fine piece of literary impressionism, it is a massive intellectual achievement. Journeying in a little -visited country, with few modern means of locomotion [...] Gautier in a few weeks grasped all the more salient characteristics of the people and the land, and set them down in the clearest and firmest fashion. His book will never cease to have its value, for it represents a state of things which has largely vanished. [...] The virginal romanticism of a splendid and tattered Spain such as Gautier found has gone [...] the contrast between Gautier's Spain of less than a century ago and the state of Spain to-day is sufficiently striking to dispel for ever the notion that we are here concerned with a country which has been hopelessly left behind in the march of civilisation.<sup>54</sup>

Ellis' remarks confirm the French, and the Romantic, origin of the British reception of Spain at the turn of the century. But they also gesture towards a more complex tension within that discourse: Spain is no longer only an ancestral and imagined land, but also a modern, real space, in which 'industrial and commercial activity abound', with an 'enlightened and intelligent' press and generally witnessing a 'new movement of progress'.<sup>55</sup> And yet, for Ellis there is still an 'eternal' Spain with a 'romantic spirit' interwoven with 'a perpetual insistence on suffering and death'.<sup>56</sup> Spanish literature and art are marked 'not by classic feeling', but by 'a quality, rising and sinking with the rise and fall of Gothic, which we call the Romantic spirit — a mixture, that is, of the mysterious and grandiose with the grotesquely bizarre, of the soaringly ideal with the crudely real'.<sup>57</sup> These ideas are further explored in the third chapter of this thesis, with an analysis of Symons' reception of Spain as at once a Decadent, primitivist and proto-Modernist space. By breaking with classical ideals, Spain embodied new

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<sup>54</sup> Ellis, *The Soul of Spain* (1908), pp. 1–2.

<sup>55</sup> Ellis, *The Soul of Spain* (1908), p. 4; pp. 6–9.

<sup>56</sup> Ellis, *The Soul of Spain* (1908), pp. 23–24.

<sup>57</sup> Ellis, *The Soul of Spain* (1908), p. 20.

aesthetic possibilities, which were ready to be explored and incorporated into newly developing British aesthetics, and by the cosmopolitan literary movements of the *fin de siècle*. These new aesthetic views are discussed in the following section.

### ***Fin-de-siècle* Decadence and Cosmopolitanism**

I have alluded so far to at least five aesthetic categories that pertain to *fin-de-siècle* culture, namely Decadence, Aestheticism, Impressionism, Symbolism and proto-Modernism.<sup>58</sup> Yet I have opted to frame this thesis under the umbrella of Decadence. The rationale for this choice can be explained by three factors that must be considered together: the distinctly cosmopolitan character of Decadence; the common themes of this literary category that corresponded with Spanish cultural tropes; and the omission of other *fin-de-siècle* popular texts that deal with the Anglo-Spanish encounter. The latter is invariably connected to the former, as this thesis offers a cosmopolitan rather than nationalistic approach. As a result, popular imperial fiction and Catholic sensationalist novels that further spread the Black Legend myth at the turn of the century have been omitted from this study.<sup>59</sup> Instead, I am primarily concerned with how those Black Legend tropes — Spanish moral decadence, barbarism, cruelty and excess — were reshaped and reimagined by the British avant-garde. Indeed, these Spanish tropes appealed particularly to the interests of Decadent writers, as I explore in more depth below.

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<sup>58</sup> For a more in-depth discussion of this terminology and the problematic of defining the *fin de siècle*, see, for example, Ruth Z. Temple, 'Truth in Labelling: Pre-Raphaelitism, Aestheticism, Decadence, Fin de Siècle', *English Literature in Transition, 1880–1920*, 17 (1974), 201–222; *Cultural Politics at the Fin de Siècle*, ed. by Sally Ledger and Scott McCracken (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995); MacLeod, (2006); and Gail Marshall, 'Introduction', in *The Cambridge Companion to the Fin de Siècle*, ed. by Gail Marshall (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007).

<sup>59</sup> For critical readings of some of these texts, see, for example, Maureen Moran, *Catholic Sensationalism and Victorian Literature* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2007).

From the Latin *de cadere*, to fall away, Decadence was initially used to describe the work of writers of the mid-nineteenth century in France, especially Baudelaire and Gautier. As the century progressed, Decadence became associated in France with the poetry of Paul Verlaine and Stéphane Mallarmé, and also with the fiction of Joris-Karl Huysmans and Jean Lorrain. By the end of the century, the term ‘decadence’ had accrued aesthetic, cultural and moral resonance, and had spread across Europe. In Britain, although already present in the work of Algernon Charles Swinburne (1837–1909) from the 1860s and overlapping with other tendencies such as Pre-Raphaelitism and Aestheticism, Decadence reached its zenith during the 1880s and 1890s. Associated with notions of degeneration and decay, Decadence became intimately associated with the *fin de siècle*.

Notoriously difficult to define, the shifting elements attached to Decadence have been redrawn since the 1990s by, among many others, Linda Dowling, David Weir, Ellis Hanson, Brian Stableford, Regenia Gagnier, Dennis Denisoff, Kirsten MacLeod, and Matthew Potolsky, re-establishing a previously ignored term. Often viewed as a tendency rather than a movement, Decadence is, as Jane Desmarais and Chris Baldick note, ‘a complex terrain’, a term characterised by its ‘indefiniteness’.<sup>60</sup> David Weir has referred to the ambiguity of the term as follows:

In one sense, decadence is like the mystical sphere whose circumference is everywhere but whose center is nowhere: naturalism, Parnassianism, aestheticism, and the rest are all arrayed ‘around’ decadence, but they do not point toward a common center. In another sense, the center and the circumference are the same: decadence as an independent movement is a sphere closed and contracted upon itself.<sup>61</sup>

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<sup>60</sup> Jane Desmarais and Chris Baldick, ‘Introduction’, in *Decadence: An Annotated Anthology*, ed. by Jane Desmarais and Chris Baldick (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2012), p. 7.

<sup>61</sup> David Weir, *Decadence and the Making of Modernism* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1995), p. xix.

Despite the resistance of the term to classification, there are common themes and elements that have served to delineate the contours of literary Decadence. Desmarais and Baldick underscore that Decadence ‘embodied a peculiar post-Romantic form of protest against modern civilisation and against inherited literary and cultural assumptions.’<sup>62</sup> Decadents tended to treat in their texts intense and fleeting sensations, *ennui*, artificiality, perversity, paradox, despair, and ‘art for art’s sake’; they rejected bourgeois philistinism; favoured a late anticlassical style; were interested in transgressive modes of sexuality, and were intrigued by magic, mysticism and the occult. The discourse of Decadence therefore maps closely onto Spanish cultural tropes: anticlassicism, primitivism, sensuality, morbid fascination with death, mysticism, ritualism, artifice, decay and disaster. And yet, these are certainly not fixed and constant categories, for Spain (as this thesis shows) or for Decadence. Kirsten MacLeod has mapped how Decadence has been ‘the site of an intense conflict over cultural meaning and value’ and has been defined in many contradictory ways:

as aristocratic, as working class, and as middle class; as high art and as popular art; as effeminate and as hyper-masculine and misogynistic; as cultured and as degenerate; as derivative and as innovative; as a moribund literature and as a literature of youth and renewal; as primitive and as over-civilized; as reactionary and as radical; as a continuation of Romanticism and as a revolt against Romanticism; as a feminist lesbian aesthetic and as a masculine misogynistic aesthetic; as introspective and as socially engaged; as fascist and as socialist, and so on.<sup>63</sup>

For some scholars, like Richard Gilman, this indeterminacy of the term makes it empty and meaningless, so finding a definition ‘may turn out to be impossible’.<sup>64</sup> Yet others, more recently, have considered that the term’s abstractness renders it, as Charles

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<sup>62</sup> Desmarais and Baldick, p. 1.

<sup>63</sup> MacLeod, pp. 18–19.

<sup>64</sup> Richard Gilman, *Decadence: The Strange Life of an Epithet* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1979), p. 9.

Bernheimer highlights, ‘important and culturally productive’.<sup>65</sup> For Liz Constable, Dennis Denisoff, and Matthew Potolsky, the ‘mobility’ of the term itself demands ‘an interdisciplinary critical response, one able to track the term’s relocations, recontextualisations, and redefinitions across historical and geographical boundaries’.<sup>66</sup> Because Decadent textual strategies ‘interfere with the boundaries and borders (national, sexual, definitional, historical, to name but a few)’, they urge a focus on the uses of Decadence rather than on its meaning.<sup>67</sup>

One of the uses to which the term is put is, indeed, cosmopolitanism. Jason David Hall and Alex Murray have noted that, as a widespread cultural phenomenon, Decadence offers an exemplary case for ‘cosmopolitan, transnational and global paradigms’.<sup>68</sup> Potolsky has also emphasised how Decadent writers ‘sort incessantly through the materials of the cultural past, defining their relationship to others in the movement by collecting disparate themes, tropes, and stylistic manners from around the globe and binding them together according to their peculiar tastes and proclivities’.<sup>69</sup> Reception for these writers was, he concludes, a ‘crucial means of reproduction’.<sup>70</sup> Potolsky also underlines how the various names artists and critics have applied to *fin-de-siècle* literary movements tend to be identified with a single national tradition: while Aestheticism was largely a British movement, and Symbolism developed chiefly in France, Decadence, by contrast, ‘was an international movement from the beginning’.<sup>71</sup> The term ‘decadence’ is then particularly apposite

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<sup>65</sup> Charles Bernheimer, *Decadent Subjects: The Idea of Decadence in Art, Literature, Philosophy, and Culture of the Fin de Siècle in Europe* (Baltimore: JHU Press, 2003), p. 5.

<sup>66</sup> Liz Constable, Dennis Denisoff, and Matthew Potolsky, ‘Introduction’, in *Perennial Decay: On the Aesthetics and Politics of Decadence*, ed. by Liz Constable, Dennis Denisoff, and Matthew Potolsky (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1999), p. 21.

<sup>67</sup> Constable, Denisoff, and Potolsky, p. 11.

<sup>68</sup> Jason David Hall and Alex Murray, *Decadent Poetics: Literature and Form at the British Fin de Siècle* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2013), p. 18.

<sup>69</sup> Potolsky, p. 4.

<sup>70</sup> Potolsky, p. 4.

<sup>71</sup> Potolsky, p. 1.



for my framing of a cosmopolitan reception of place: a place, Spain, that nonetheless has been shunned by cosmopolitan readings of Decadence.

Indeed, recent years have seen an upsurge of interest in the growth of cosmopolitanism and transnationalism in the literary culture of Decadence and the *fin de siècle*. Over the last decade, Regenia Gagnier, Leela Gandhi, Matthew Potolsky, Alex Murray and Stefano Evangelista, among others, have all redrawn our vision of Decadence and the literary culture of the *fin de siècle* as truly transnational and global in scope.<sup>72</sup> And yet, the cosmopolitan foundations of British Decadence itself tend to be reduced to very specific European geographies, mainly France. In order to map the cosmopolitan nature of Decadence, it is imperative to reconsider and recover the role of different localities. Spain is certainly one of the most neglected Decadent geographies: there are barely any allusions to British Decadence's reception of Spain in critical studies. Nonetheless, as this thesis sets out to demonstrate, Spain persists as an operative element in many works of Decadent literature. Many of the authors included in this thesis were cosmopolitans by upbringing, and remained so. They were all undoubtedly interested in different countries and cultures. Yet Spain and Spanish culture gained a prominent position in their life and works, as it appealed to a deep and persistent need in their sensibilities. This attraction was related to a certain strand of aesthetics of which Spanish landscape and culture were paradigmatic: an aesthetics of extremes that I now move on to fully explore.

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<sup>72</sup> See Leela Gandhi, *Affective Communities: Anticolonial Thought, Fin-de-Siècle Radicalism, and the Politics of Friendship* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2006); Regenia Gagnier, *Individualism, Decadence and Globalization: On the Relationship of Part to Whole, 1859-1920* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2010); Potolsky (2012); 'Fin-de-Siècle Cosmopolitanism' issue in *Comparative Critical Studies* 10:2 (2013), ed. by Stefano Evangelista and Richard Hibbitt; and Alex Murray, *Landscapes of Decadence: Literature and Place at the Fin de Siècle* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016).

### The 'truth of extremes'

In the second edition of *The Symbolist Movement in Literature* (1899, 1908, 1919), Arthur Symons described the work of the quintessential Decadent Joris-Karl Huysmans as one that subordinates 'every quality to that of sharp, telling truth, the truth of extremes.'<sup>73</sup> By doing so, Huysmans' style 'loses charm', warned Symons; yet 'it can be dazzling; it has the solidity of those walls encrusted with gems which are to be seen in a certain chapel in Prague; it blazes with colour, and arabesques into a thousand fantastic patterns.'<sup>74</sup> This 'truth of extremes', situated at the utmost point of either of the ends (of a line, series, or scale), that Symons alludes to applies to many other Decadent works.

The conflicting and extreme nature of the Decadent imagination and style is well-established: many scholars have detected in Decadence extreme moods and extreme conditions of spiritual and emotional experience. R. K. R. Thornton, for instance, sets up a 'decadent dilemma', saying, 'The Decadent is a man caught between two opposite and apparently incompatible pulls: on the one hand he is drawn by the world, its necessities, and the attractive impressions he receives from it, while on the other hand he yearns towards the eternal, the ideal, and the unworldly.'<sup>75</sup> Philip Stephan also claimed in *Paul Verlaine and Decadence* that 'the notion of decadence involves a sustained paradox, for, unable to choose between two opposing ideals, it cordially accepts both. Decadent thinkers accepted Rousseau's idea that nature is good and civilization bad, yet they enthusiastically preferred the artificial.'<sup>76</sup> Taking his cue

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<sup>73</sup> Arthur Symons, *The Symbolist Movement in Literature* (London: Archibald Constable, 1908), p. 148.

<sup>74</sup> Symons, *The Symbolist Movement in Literature* (1908), p. 148.

<sup>75</sup> R. K. R. Thornton, "'Decadence' in Late Nineteenth-Century England", in *Decadence and the 1890s*, ed. by Malcolm Bradbury and David Palmer (London: Edward Arnold, 1979), p. 26.

<sup>76</sup> Philip Stephan, *Paul Verlaine and the Decadence, 1882-90* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1975), p. 19.

from this approach, Michael Riffaterre has more recently looked at the way Decadent writing is based upon a 'paradoxical' rewriting of Romantic themes and topoi. Decadence, he suggests, goes against the 'doxa' (opinion, common sense) by transforming Romantic conventions into parodic or hyperbolic repetitions.<sup>77</sup>

From a theoretical perspective, I link this extreme condition of Decadence and its reception of Spain to some of the ideas of Bataille, and to those of his follower Julia Kristeva. Broadly speaking, their theories involve two opposing and complementary concepts which, as Catherine Marchak notes, they both conceive as 'universals', common to all cultures: the homogeneous and the heterogeneous.<sup>78</sup> The homogeneous is understood as what is made obedient to rules, made orderly, whilst the heterogeneous can be thought of as what is disorderly, rejected, simply *other*.

In Bataille's work, a homogeneous society is based on production, and rational utility: on everything that is viewed as 'useful' and 'reasonable'. This homogeneous society is thus characterised by the 'bourgeois form of life, everyday routine, and method (particularly as exemplified by Western science)'.<sup>79</sup> On the other hand, a heterogeneous world includes everything irrational. It is a world characterised by 'the opposition of two extreme forms': 'there is an identity of opposites between glory and dejection, between exalted and imperative (higher) forms and impoverished (lower) forms.'<sup>80</sup> Both extremes prompt a feeling of both attraction and repulsion. Heterogeneous elements include disease, the erotic, opposition to the norm, mysticism and the unconscious (on which Kristeva would later focus). Marchak argues that

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<sup>77</sup> Michael Riffaterre, 'Decadent Paradoxes', in *Perennial Decay: On the Aesthetics and Politics of Decadence*, ed. by Liz Constable, Dennis Denisoff, and Matthew Potolsky (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1999), pp. 65–83.

<sup>78</sup> Catherine Marchak, 'The Joy of Transgression: Bataille and Kristeva', *Philosophy Today*, 34:4 (1990), 354–363 (p. 354).

<sup>79</sup> Marchack, pp. 354–55.

<sup>80</sup> Bataille, *Visions of Excess*, pp. 144–45.

transgression, for both Bataille and Kristeva, thus occurs in the most basic sense ‘when (excluded) heterogeneous elements are introduced in the realm of homogeneity’.<sup>81</sup>

I contend that these Bataillean and Kristevan notions offer a framework for understanding the Decadent reception of Spain. Kristeva relied heavily on Mallarmé’s Decadent dialectics in her articulation of a socially activist, postmodern and psychoanalytic semiotics.<sup>82</sup> One of her most important contributions, that signification is composed of two elements, the symbolic (the homogeneous, associated with structure) and the semiotic (the heterogeneous, the emotional field, tied to the instincts) thus leans on Decadent paradoxes. Kristeva has also actively engaged with Spanish mysticism throughout her career, more recently with the volume *Thérèse mon amour: Sainte Thérèse d’Avila* (2008), where she engages with the problem of representing fluctuating psychological formations, ‘giving the psyche a singular, dissident character’.<sup>83</sup> Bataille’s notion of heterology, as mentioned above, is linked to his reception of a Spanish aesthetics of ‘anguished pleasure’. This unsettling sense of delight that Bataille sensed in Spain in the early 1920s provided, as David F. Richter notes, the foundation for theoretical aspects of his writing, which considered the work of Spanish cultural icons such as St John of the Cross, St Teresa, Miguel de Cervantes, Francisco de Goya, Pablo Picasso, Salvador Dalí, Luis Buñuel, and Federico García Lorca.<sup>84</sup>

In a 1946 publication on the current cultural and political events in Spain (*Actualité: ‘L’Espagne libre’*) [*Current Events: ‘Free Spain’*], Bataille recalled his experience in Spain and the particular qualities of Spanish culture that agreed with his

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<sup>81</sup> Marchak, p. 354.

<sup>82</sup> See Julia Kristeva, *Revolution in Poetic Language*, trans. by Margaret Waller (New York: Columbia University Press, 1984).

<sup>83</sup> Carol Mastrangelo Bové, ‘Kristeva’s Thérèse: Mysticism and Modernism’, *Journal of French and Francophone Philosophy*, 21:1 (2013), 105–115 (p. 105).

<sup>84</sup> Richter, p. 11.

notion of expression at the limits: 'I then began to understand that uneasiness is often the secret to the most intense pleasures. The Spanish language designates this kind of exaltation that underlies anguish with a precise word, *la emoción* (*emotion*): this is exactly the feeling given by the bull's horns missing *by a finger* the body of *the bullfighter*.'<sup>85</sup> In Bataille's view, that 'uneasiness' can provide the 'most intense pleasure' underscores, Richter argues, an 'intensely richer experience of reality'.<sup>86</sup> Alongside bullfighting, Bataille noted a similar ecstatic and anguished pleasure in flamenco dancing: 'Dancing, essentially the miming of an anguished pleasure, exasperates a defiance that suspends breathing. It communicates an ecstasy, a kind of suffocated revelation of death and the feeling of touching the impossible'.<sup>87</sup> This simulation of an 'anguished pleasure' reveals an art form that captures both pain simultaneous with the ecstatic excess of emotion: 'the feeling of touching the impossible'.

For Bataille, this Spanish contemplation of experience at the limits affirms a sovereign existence: part of living more authentically involves doing it, as Richter observes, 'at one's limits and having nostalgia for the nearness of death'.<sup>88</sup> Bataille found the same notion of extreme experience in Spanish mysticism. Regarding his fascination with St John of the Cross, Bataille explained that 'certainly it is necessary for me to go to the extreme limit, to what one would perhaps call mysticism, and that I have tried to designate through St John of the Cross.'<sup>89</sup>

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<sup>85</sup> Bataille, 'A propos de "Pour qui sonne le glas?"', p. 120. My translation from the French: 'Je commençais à comprendre alors que le malaise est souvent le secret des plaisirs les plus grands. La langue espagnole a pour désigner cette sorte d'exaltation que sous-tend l'angoisse un mot précis, *la emoción*: c'est exactement le sentiment que donnent des cornes de taureau manquant *d'un doigt* le corps *du torero*'.

<sup>86</sup> Richter, p. 59.

<sup>87</sup> Bataille, 'A propos de "Pour qui sonne le glas?"', p. 122. My translation from the French: 'La danse, essentiellement mime du plaisir angoissé, exaspère un défi qui suspend la respiration. Elle communique une extase, une sorte de révélation suffoquée de la mort et le sentiment de toucher l'impossible'.

<sup>88</sup> Richter, p. 60.

<sup>89</sup> Bataille, 'Interview with Madeleine Chapsal', p. 222.

Writers linked to Decadence, I argue, anticipate the same qualities in Spain, finding a sort of Bataillean heterogeneous society where the opposition of two extreme forms is a constant, a mode of returning to a primitive darkness and light of violence and eroticism while still being in the modern world. Examples of this tendency are manifold. As mentioned above, Arthur Symons referred to the ‘extremes’ of the Spanish temperament as encompassing the ‘whole gamut from wild gaiety to sombre horror’.<sup>90</sup> Havelock Ellis also observed how ‘Spaniards generally are a grave and silent people, tending to run to extremes’.<sup>91</sup> Vernon Lee claimed that ‘Spain has helped my whole life with its ironical paradox, its hyperbolic, “all or nothing” Quixotry’.<sup>92</sup> She found Spanish Catholic churches to be ‘too much’, but idolised the Moorish past of the country.<sup>93</sup> This ‘extreme’ condition of Spain that will be explored in depth in this thesis was in direct opposition to the perceived moral values of moderation that prevailed in Victorian Britain, especially among the middle classes that Decadent writers opposed. If Decadence challenged, as Dennis Denisoff observes, ‘false normativisations such as the fundamental importance of the middle-class family model, industrial progress and a common moral basis to beauty and the meaning of life’, Spanish culture also appeared to challenge many of these notions.<sup>94</sup> Spain’s aesthetics of extremes created a space in which bourgeois values were excluded or converted into their opposites.

Indeed, it is not coincidental that Spain appeared caricatured in the satirical press in much the same terms as the Decadent writers did. The combination of radical

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<sup>90</sup> Symons, ‘The Painters of Seville’, p. 25.

<sup>91</sup> Ellis, *The Soul of Spain* (1908), p. 341.

<sup>92</sup> Lee, *The Sentimental Traveller*, p. ix.

<sup>93</sup> Vernon Lee, *Commonplace Book*, ns. 4, Collection of Vernon Lee Materials, Colby College Special Collections, Waterville, Maine, USA.

<sup>94</sup> Dennis Denisoff, ‘Decadence and Aestheticism’, in *The Cambridge Companion to the Fin de Siècle*, ed. by Gail Marshall (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), p. 32.

politics, sexual dissidence and privileging of the individual's experience of beauty that Decadence represented was roundly criticised. The magazine *Punch* attacked Decadent figures like Aubrey Beardsley and Oscar Wilde, and created types like 'the fleshly poet'. Other new *fin-de-siècle* ideals that defied Victorian conventions were also ridiculed: *Punch* mocked the figure of the New Woman, presenting her as a resentful, over-educated spinster.

Although not much acknowledged, Spanish culture appeared scorned in connection with these new, dissident figures. An oft-cited 1894 *Punch* cartoon characterised the New Woman as 'Donna Quixote', depicting her as a bespectacled, mannish spinster crowding her imagination with 'disorderly notions *picked out of books*' (fig. 1).<sup>95</sup> Along the same lines, an 1898 short dialogue entitled 'In the Studio of the Impressionists', mocked the subject matter of this new artistic movement, most prominently the 'Spanish bull-fight'.<sup>96</sup> The clearest example of the connection between Spanish culture and Decadent authors in the satirical press appeared, however, in 1895. On 27 April, *Punch* published the poem 'Carmencita: An Impression' with a drawing of a Spanish female dancer (fig. 2).<sup>97</sup> In clear allusion to both John Singer Sargent's 1890 painting of the Spanish dancer La Carmencita (1868–1910), and of Arthur Symonds' poems of Spanish dancers, the *Punch* poem presents the figure of a 'passionate' and 'ardent', yet ludicrous and unskilful dancer.

These representations are framed within a backdrop of widely hostile public opinion, when British foreign policy was generally anti-Spanish. Spain did not

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<sup>95</sup> 'Donna Quixote', *Punch*, 28 April 1894, p. 194. The cartoon bears uncanny similarities with Goya's famous etching *The Sleep of Reason Produces Monsters* (c. 1799), which depicts the Spanish painter sleeping with his reason slumbering and tormented by monsters that symbolise ignorance.

<sup>96</sup> Arthur à Beckett, 'In the Studio of the Impressionist', *Punch*, 19 February 1898, p. 82.

<sup>97</sup> Warham St. Leger, 'Carmencita', *Punch*, 27 April 1895, p. 204.



# **DONNA QUIXOTE.**

[“A world of disorderly notions picked out of books, crowded into his (her) imagination.”—*Don Quixote*.]

Fig. 1 ‘Donna Quixote’, *Punch*, 28 April 1894, p. 194.



# CARMENCITA.

(An Impression.)

"O EAST is east, and west is west  
And never the twain shall meet."  
And the dance of Spain is one of the twain  
To the English Man in the Street.



We love the trick of the lofty kick  
And the muscular display  
Of the nymph who has leapt at a muslin hoop  
And stopp'd in her flight half-way.  
A plain, blunt girl in the stormy swirl  
Of accordion pleats and laces,  
Tho' she cannot dance, if she spin and prance,  
Is numbered among the Graces.  
For heel and toe our hearts can glow  
And the feats of the rhythmic elog,  
And a poem of motion wells forth in the notion  
Of a Serpentine Dancing Dog.  
But the dancer's art, of her life a part,  
A song of the wordless soul  
With a tale to tell, like the music's swell,  
Too large for the word's control,  
That goes not down in London town  
Where dogg'd conventions stick,  
And dancers still must charm with frill,  
Or "make shymnastic drick."  
As the jungle king with his wrathful spring,  
To the lamb that aptly bleats,  
As the trumpet's blare to the palsied air  
Of that which plays in pleats,  
So is east to west, with its sun-born zest,  
With fire at the quick heart's core,  
And passions bold as the ardent gold  
Of the sun on a southern shore.

Fig. 2 Warham St. Leger, 'Carmencita', *Punch*, 27 April 1895, p. 204.

pose an immediate threat to British national, and imperial, interests, but the British government openly sided with the United States in the Spanish-American war of 1898. In the press, only *The Saturday Review*, to which many Decadent writers contributed, was pro-Spanish.<sup>98</sup>

Spanish ‘extremes’, whether in the form of ‘quixotic’ notions or ‘primitive’ popular culture, were condemned by middle-class Victorian morality as much as they were praised and reinvented by Decadent writers. One prominent example that serves us to illustrate this reinvention is Symons’ reception of Spanish bullfighting. This popular tradition, as Symons described it, was similarly a mixture of amusement and cruelty, which is echoed by the contradictory, Decadent sensation of perverse pleasure. In an 1898 letter to W.B. Yeats, Symons wrote that he had been to a bullfight and had written ‘a *horrible* description of it, theorising on the universal instinct of cruelty, & confessing my own share in it’.<sup>99</sup> As a result of that experience, he would write the essay ‘A Bull Fight at Valencia’, published in 1898.

Symons sat in the second row of boxes at the *Plaza de Toros*, or bullring, for two hours and a half, and witnessed the ‘Massacre of the Horses’ and the killing of eight bulls. In his gruesome descriptions, he displayed an evident awe for ‘that red plunge of horns into the living flesh, that living body ripped and lifted and rolled to the ground, that monstrous visible agony dragging itself about the sand.’<sup>100</sup> He manifested his bewilderment at the significance of ‘the cruelty of human nature what is it? — and how is it that it has struck root so deep?’<sup>101</sup>

<sup>98</sup> Elie Halévy, *A History of the English People. Epilogue: 1895–1905*, trans. by E.I. Watkin, 3 vols (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1939), i, pp. 75–80.

<sup>99</sup> Arthur Symons, *Arthur Symons: Selected Letters, 1880–1935*, ed. by Karl Beckson and John M. Munro (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 1989), p. 126.

<sup>100</sup> Arthur Symons, ‘A Bull Fight at Valencia’, in *Cities and Sea-Coasts and Islands*, (London: W. Collins, 1918), p. 137. This essay was first published on 26 November 1898 in the *Saturday Review*, and then reprinted in *Cities and Sea-Coasts and Islands*.

<sup>101</sup> Symons, ‘A Bull Fight at Valencia’, p. 137.

I have always held that cruelty has a deep root in human nature, and is not that exceptional thing which, for the most part, we are pleased to suppose it. I believe it has an unadmitted, abominable attraction for almost every one; for many of us, under scrupulous disguises; more simply for others, and especially for people of certain races; but the same principle is there, under whatever manifestation, and, if one takes one's stand on nature, claiming that whatever is deeply rooted there has its own right to exist, what of the natural rights of cruelty?<sup>102</sup>

Although alluding to other races, Symons is here concerned with 'something' that goes beyond notions of race: the inborn cruelty of man. To quote Julia Kristeva, 'the foreigner is neither glorified as a secret *Volksgeist* not banished as disruptive of rationalist urbanity. Uncanny, foreignness is within us: we are our own foreigners.'<sup>103</sup> By acknowledging his 'own share in' the bullfighting, Symons equalled his own cruelty with that of the Spanish people. The foreigner did not seem to be the Spanish anymore, but Symons' troubled self. He could not help but to continue observing the agony of the animal: 'I quickly turned back to the arena again; I hated, sickened, and looked; and I could not have gone out until the last bull had been killed.'<sup>104</sup> Symons even felt an awe for the figure of the *toreador*, whom he described as though he were a dandy intellectual: 'I once sat opposite one of the most famous toreros at a *table-d'hôte* dinner, and, as I contrasted him with the heavy, middle-class people who sat around, I was more than ever impressed by the distinction, the physical good-breeding, something almost of an intellectual clearness and shapeliness.'<sup>105</sup> Like Huysmans' style, the 'extremes' of Spain can be unpleasant, but also 'dazzling'. They can perpetuate Orientalist and primitivist discourses, yet also reverse them. This thesis

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<sup>102</sup> Symons, 'A Bull Fight at Valencia', p. 131.

<sup>103</sup> Julia Kristeva, *Strangers to Ourselves*, trans. by Leon S. Roudiez (New York: Columbia University Press, 1991), p. 181.

<sup>104</sup> Symons, 'A Bull Fight at Valencia', p. 136.

<sup>105</sup> Arthur Symons, 'Seville', in *Cities and Sea-Coasts and Islands* (London: W. Collins, 1918), p. 12. This essay was written in 1898, but first published in March 1901 in *Harper Monthly's Magazine*, and then reprinted in *Cities and Sea-Coasts and Islands*.

reconstructs how these Spanish aesthetics of extremes informed and shaped the British Decadent discourse, while reflecting a variety of concerns of Decadent British writers' immediate present.

### **From Decadent Aesthetes to Decadent Catholics**

Starting with Vernon Lee's Decadent Aestheticism and ending with Michael Field's Catholic Decadence, this study is conceived as a chronological exploration (1880–1920) of the wide range of forms in which Spain reconfigured the aesthetics of British writers linked to Decadence. In order to do so, I concentrate on four authors who dealt with different aspects of Spanish aesthetics and embraced divergent approaches to Decadence. In the selection of writers, I pay special attention to balancing canonical and non-canonical authorship. In line with the discussed fluctuation of the term 'decadence', the canon of Decadent works and writers is equally unstable: not all the writers I discuss here viewed themselves as Decadents, and yet the idea of Decadence was central to their literary production. As a critic, Vernon Lee wanted to reject morbidity and Decadence, but penned some of the best known Decadent tales of the British *fin de siècle*. Michael Field were vocal in their dislike of *The Yellow Book*, but some French Decadents, like Baudelaire, had an enormous influence on their work.<sup>106</sup> They also occasionally used Decadent tropes for particular erotic effect. The writers I

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<sup>106</sup> On 17 April 1894, after seeing *The Yellow Book* for sale, Edith Cooper wrote: 'We have been almost blinded by the glare of hell [...] The window seemed to be gibbering, my eyes to be filled with incurable jaundice.' Michael Field, *Works and Days*, British Library, Add. MS 46782, fol. 37v; Ana Parejo Vadillo has noted that the similarities between some of Michael Field's poems of the city and those of Baudelaire 'point towards the enormous influence of Baudelaire on Michael Field's work', in Ana Parejo Vadillo, *Women Poets and Urban Aestheticism: Passengers of Modernity* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005), p. 174.

discuss here, in short, use Decadence and its associations in a wide range of contexts and toward a variety of ends.

This thesis recuperates and examines the presence of Spanish aesthetics in Vernon Lee, Oscar Wilde, Arthur Symons and Michael Field, through the exploration of a wide array of archival material and primary texts. This organisation by author, however, is not conceived as a homogeneous exploration. Vernon Lee and Arthur Symons travelled to Spain and developed artistic friendships with Spanish intellectuals, which resulted in the production of many texts inspired by this first-hand contact. Symons was, also, the only author analysed here who was completely fluent in Spanish — Vernon Lee could read ‘fairly fluently’ in Spanish but found it ‘very difficult’ and never spoke it fluently.<sup>107</sup> In contrast, Oscar Wilde and Michael Field have fewer texts directly connected to Spain. However, their ‘Spanish’ texts serve as exemplary case studies for two of the main Spanish themes more widely present in Decadent writing. For this reason, in my second and fourth chapters on Oscar Wilde and Michael Field, respectively, I make reference to the work of other writers (Charles Ricketts (1866–1931) and John Gray (1866–1934), among others), which serve to frame and contextualise their own texts.

This thesis begins with the Decadent Aestheticism of Vernon Lee. Chapter One places Vernon Lee’s Spanish writings and her use of Spanish tropes from the 1880s in the context of her literary production. It argues that these Spanish pieces, especially ‘Comparative Aesthetics’ (1880), ‘Don Juan’ (1887), and ‘The Virgin of

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<sup>107</sup> Vernon Lee to José Fernández Giménez, Bagni di Lucca, 1 September 1880, Jose Fernández Giménez Archive, DC2, F39, Private Collection, Fort Collins, Colorado, USA: ‘Je lis [Spanish] assez couramment’; Vernon Lee to Matilda Paget, Tangier, 12 December 1888, Collection of Vernon Lee Materials, Colby College Special Collections, Waterville, Maine, USA: ‘I have Spanish lessons 3 times a week from a Jew [...] Find it very difficult’.

the Seven Daggers' (1896, 1909, 1927), were vitally important to her artistic development and her articulation of Aestheticism and Decadence. Through the unveiling of Lee's crucial relationship to the Spanish diplomat and art critic José Fernández Giménez (1832–1903), and Lee's multifaceted reception of Spanish culture, this chapter also challenges critics' views on Decadent cosmopolitanism.

Chapter Two frames Oscar Wilde's short story 'The Birthday of the Infanta' (1889, 1891) within the wider context of the Decadent interest in the paintings of Velázquez, the Spanish Baroque and the notion of 'Black Spain', a prevalent term in late nineteenth-century culture that identified Spain with horror, gloom and darkness. The chapter explores how Spanish Baroque art and history act as a universe of reference in Wilde's tale, and how this visual imagery of dark splendour will later help Wilde to articulate his aesthetics in other works. In *A House of Pomegranates* (1891), the book in which 'The Birthday of the Infanta' is included, the stylistic rendering of the worship of materialism is as over-elaborate as in *Dorian Gray*. Likewise, the Spanish Infanta can be read as a juvenile version of the fatal woman who figures in *Salomé* (1891, 1894).

In Chapter Three I focus on the wide range of Arthur Symons' Spanish writings of the 1890s, principally drawn from his travels to the country in 1891 and in 1898–1899. Like Vernon Lee and Oscar Wilde, Symons was fascinated by the 'blackness' of Spain and by that 'instinctive pessimism being always, even in those untouched by religion, the shadow upon life.'<sup>108</sup> Yet he was chiefly attracted to the extreme contrast of Spanish darkness and death (the flagellants in the Holy Week processions, the bullfighting) with its 'brightness' and life. He delighted in the joys that Spain offered (in particular its popular culture: flamenco dancing, singing and

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<sup>108</sup> Symons, 'The Painters of Seville', p. 25.

numerous festivities), which for Symons were constituent parts, on the one hand, of a Decadent discourse of sensuousness and pleasure, and, on the other, of a Symbolist and proto-Modernist discourse of primitivism. As the visionary critic he was, Symons revealed flamenco as an art form caught in transition, faltering between Romantic *Volksgeist*, Orientalist eroticism, and an emerging primitivist Modernism. The chapter unveils how Spanish aesthetics were instrumental in Symons' most celebrated critical piece, *The Symbolist Movement in Literature* (1899), and in his poetic work and travel literature of the late 1890s and early 1900s.

Lastly, Chapter Four places and explicates Michael Field's engagement with St John of the Cross and St Teresa within a wider context of Catholic Decadent interest in Spanish mysticism in the 1900s and 1910s. Although Catholicism was already a radical presence in *fin-de-siècle* culture, the trials of Oscar Wilde in 1895 for 'gross indecency' propelled the conversion to Roman Catholicism of a number of British Decadent writers who found in the Catholic Church a better receptacle for their Decadent aesthetics. Amongst the plethora of religious texts from which the Decadents drew inspiration, Spanish mystic poetry of the sixteenth century is, I argue, *the* constant presence in their work. Looking at the importance of Spanish mysticism for Arthur Symons and John Gray, this chapter focuses on Michael Field in particular, and shows how the combination of sensuality and spirituality of Spanish mystic poetry served as an impulse to develop their own Catholic poetry of the 1910s, and to liberate their own sexuality after their conversion.

Despite the number of texts and material discussed in this thesis, the map traced in it is far from complete. Principally covering a specifically *Decadent* reception of Spanish aesthetics, this study must therefore exclude many other interesting late nineteenth-century authors and texts. Popular imperialist fiction and

Catholic sensationalist novels set in Spain are not included in this study. As mentioned above, these novels further spread negative Spanish stereotypes at the turn of the century. This thesis, however, is primarily concerned with how these traditionally negative tropes — Spanish moral decadence, barbarism, cruelty and excess — were instead reshaped and reimagined. Likewise, the importance of Spain to the work of other *fin-de-siècle* writers, such as Mary Augusta Ward (1851–1920) and Robert (1852–1936) and Gabriela Cunningham Graham (1861–1906), lies beyond the scope of this thesis, as theirs was not framed by the Decadent aesthetics of extremes that brings this study together. Despite such omissions, the texts analysed in the following chapters delineate the contours, pervasiveness and complexity of Spain as an important space in British *fin-de-siècle* culture, and as representative of determining aesthetics for the articulation of the discourses of Decadence.



## 1.

**‘All or Nothing’: Vernon Lee, Aesthetic Duality and Spanish Excess**

’Tis the impression of a country and people without  
moderation [...] [with a] soul of excess.<sup>1</sup>

Vernon Lee (1889)

**Introduction**

At the age of 52, the cosmopolitan intellectual Vernon Lee (1856–1935) articulated the critical role Spain had played in her art and her life:

Spain has helped my whole life with its ironical paradox, its hyperbolic, “all or nothing” Quixotry, its cavalier aloofness from petty realities and futile advantage, its preference, as in the painting of Velasquez compared with that of Rubens, of [*sic*] the black and white bony essentials of things to their pink and juicy pulpiness.<sup>2</sup>

This statement foregrounds Lee’s multifaceted relationship with Spain: a country she openly deprecated and which, nonetheless, simultaneously informed one strand of her aesthetics. For Lee, the ‘hyperbolic’ condition of Spain involved, above all, excess, and the ambivalence of extremes in constant tension: ‘all or nothing’, ‘black or white’. Lee’s dual character — of intellectual analysis and aesthetic sensibility — responded to the contradictions of a country which, at the end of the nineteenth century, was struggling to redefine its political and national identity. In the late 1870s, when Lee

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<sup>1</sup> Vernon Lee, *Commonplace Book*, ns. 4, Collection of Vernon Lee Materials, Colby College Special Collections, Waterville, Maine, USA.

<sup>2</sup> Lee, *The Sentimental Traveller*, p. ix.

first came in contact with the country, Spain was negotiating its imperial past and attempting to modernise its difficult present.<sup>3</sup> As a result, the country epitomised powerful dualities that attracted Lee throughout her life — the Christian and the pagan, the real and the fantastic, the good and the evil, the present and the past. Such Spanish dichotomies accompanied Lee's prolific writing career for twenty-five years; this chapter chronologically recuperates their presence, meaning and evolution in Lee's work.

Vernon Lee published more than forty books on aesthetic, historical, philosophical and social issues during her career. She was a regular contributor to key critical journals of late-Victorian Britain: from the liberal *Contemporary Review* and the popular *Blackwell's Magazine* to the more elitist *Fortnightly Review*, *Athenaeum*, and the *Nation*. Like many of her late-Victorian contemporaries, Lee suffered a period of neglect during the Modernist decades. Today, however, Lee's vast body of work is the object of renewed attention in the wake of the resurgent interest in Aestheticism, the *fin de siècle*, and the gendering of Decadence. The last two decades, in particular, has seen an explosion of Lee criticism in the form of individual essays and articles, a literary biography (Colby, 2003); critical monographs (Zorn, 2003; and Pulham, 2008); collections of essays (Maxwell and Pulham, 2006; Cenni and Bizzotto, 2006); an edited collection of her supernatural tales (Maxwell and Pulham, 2006); an introduction to her work (Kandola, 2010), and selected letters (Gagel, 2017). Lee's

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<sup>3</sup> In the years between 1868 and 1874 Spain witnessed a Revolution that put an end to the monarchy of Queen Isabella II, a one-year provisional regency, a two-year rule of a new liberal king brought from Italy and a two-year Republic; in other words, profound political instability. The Restoration of the monarchy in 1874 under the moderate rule of Alfonso XII of Spain aimed to create a new political system that ensured stability by rotating the Liberal and Conservative parties in the government. For more on the history of Spain in the mid and late nineteenth century see, for example, the section 'Liberalism and Reaction, 1833–1931' in Simon Barton, *A History of Spain* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009).

devotional relation to Italy, the only country she ‘really ever cared for’,<sup>4</sup> has been the object of increasing attention.<sup>5</sup> Lee’s connection to Ancient Greece has also been explored in more general studies.<sup>6</sup>

However, only a few of these recent works comment on Lee’s reception of Spain. The relatively small amount of Lee’s writing that directly draws on Spain and her articulated aversion to the country have contributed to this neglect. Lee admitted in her writing to having little appreciation for Spain, an ‘unkind-looking country’, as she put it.<sup>7</sup> She was also dismissive of its art, especially the Spanish Baroque, which she described as a ‘cultus of death, damnation, tears and wounds’.<sup>8</sup> And yet, some of the essays and short stories that current criticism see as key to her aesthetics and ethics, most prominently the short story ‘The Virgin of the Seven Daggers’ (1896, 1909, 1927), but also the essays ‘The Artistic Dualism in the Renaissance’ (1879), ‘Comparative Aesthetics’ (1880), ‘Don Juan’ (1887), ‘In Praise of Old Houses’ (1897) and ‘The Generalife’ (1905) were directly informed by the intensity and the paradoxes Lee found in Spanish people, places, history and culture. Spanish history, literature and art were indeed constant points of reference in much of Lee’s writing, especially in her work on aesthetics, her short fiction, and her travel essays in the period 1880–1910.

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<sup>4</sup> Vernon Lee, *The Tower of the Mirrors and Other Essays on the Spirit of Places* (London: John Lane, The Bodley Head, 1914), p. 153.

<sup>5</sup> See, for instance, Hilary Fraser, ‘Vernon Lee, England, Italy and Identity Politics’, in *Britannia Italia Germania: Taste and Travel in the Nineteenth Century*, ed. by Carol Richardson and Graham Smith (Edinburgh: University of Edinburgh Press, 2001); Catherine Maxwell, ‘Vernon Lee and the Ghosts of Italy’, in *Unfolding the South: Nineteenth-Century British Women Writers and Artists in Italy 1700–1900*, ed. Alison Chapman and Jane Stabler (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2003); and ‘Dalla stanza accanto’: *Vernon Lee e Firenze settant’anni dopo*, ed. by Serena Cenni and Elisa Bizzotto (Florence: Consiglio Regionale della Toscana, 2006).

<sup>6</sup> See Stefano Evangelista, *British Aestheticism and Ancient Greece: Hellenism, Reception, Gods in Exile* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009).

<sup>7</sup> Vernon Lee, *The Enchanted Woods and Other Essays* (London: John Lane, The Bodley Head, 1905), p. 219.

<sup>8</sup> Vernon Lee, ‘Introduction to the Third Unlikely Story: *Ex-voto dans le Gout Espagnol*’, in *For Maurice: Five Unlikely Stories* (London: John Lane, The Bodley Head, 1927), p. xviii.

This chapter, therefore, unearths Spain's significance for Lee's articulation of *fin-de-siècle* Aestheticism and Decadence, and for her own artistic development. Critics have tended to trace Lee's Aestheticism and Decadence through English, Italian and German traditions; I argue that Spanish thought, and especially that of the Spanish diplomat and art critic José Fernández Giménez (1832–1903), was at least as important for Lee's intellectual formation in the late 1870s and early 1880s. Fernández Giménez was a cosmopolitan and eclectic figure, relatively unknown by Lee scholars today, whose personality and vast knowledge exerted a decisive influence on the young Vernon Lee. This chapter presents the figure of Fernández Giménez and unveils Lee's crucial relationship with the Spanish art critic. Through the exploration of new correspondence I discovered in Fernández Giménez's family archive and unpublished personal notes, I demonstrate how Fernández Giménez was at the centre of Lee's intellectual life in the 1870s and 1880s.<sup>9</sup> Later, Lee's sojourn in Fernández Giménez's native southern region of Andalusia in 1888 would prompt her to write the tale 'The Virgin of the Seven Daggers', described by Sondeep Kandola as 'unquestionably the most cosmopolitan and complex of Lee's short fiction'.<sup>10</sup> The bright Moorish vistas of the past, combined with the dark Catholic 'cultus' of the present, provided Lee with a framework of extremes that allowed her to explore *fin-de-siècle* aesthetic values.

Indeed, Spain is a fundamental, unexplored geocultural space for a writer generally regarded as a 'truly cosmopolitan figure'.<sup>11</sup> Born in France in 1856 to English parents, Vernon Lee spent her first twenty years moving from Germany, to Switzerland, to France, and to Italy, where she finally made her home. This nomadic

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<sup>9</sup> This correspondence is now at the Fernández Giménez Collection (Colorado, USA), which I catalogued in 2014–2015.

<sup>10</sup> Sondeep Kandola, *Vernon Lee* (Tavistock: Northcote House, 2010), p. 55.

<sup>11</sup> Patricia Pulham, *Art and the Transitional Object in Vernon Lee's Supernatural Tales* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2008), p. xii.

upbringing enabled Lee to attain both fluency and style in spoken and written French, German and Italian. While growing up she spoke better French than English, which made her even hesitate ‘between becoming a French or an English writer’, and her first publications were in French and in Italian.<sup>12</sup> After settling in Italy, Lee surrounded herself with people of different nationalities, which complemented and encouraged her cosmopolitan disposition. She had an extensive knowledge of European culture and her work constantly referred to European art and literature.

Like most Victorian intellectuals, Lee was acquainted with the foremost literary and artistic figures of the Spanish Golden Age, in particular with the works of the authors Miguel de Cervantes (1547–1616), Lope de Vega (1562–1635) and Calderón de la Barca (1600–1681), and of the painters Diego Velázquez (1599–1660) and Francisco de Zurbarán (1598–1664). Lee’s erudite allusions to Spanish High Art appeared in her writing from the start of her career.<sup>13</sup> Yet it was the Spanish aesthete José Fernández Giménez, a regular visitor in the Paget family home in Florence in the 1880s, who encouraged her to expand her knowledge of Spanish culture. More importantly, as the following section reveals, Fernández Giménez stimulated Lee’s first foray into both aesthetic writing and supernatural fiction.

### **Aesthetic Dualities: The ‘strong influence’ of José Fernández Giménez**

Vernon Lee’s enthusiastic first impression of Fernández Giménez is recorded in a 1878 letter to her friend, the Italian author and translator Linda Villari (1836–1915):

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<sup>12</sup> Vernon Lee, *The Handling of Words and Other Studies in Literary Psychology* (London: John Lane, 1923), p. 293.

<sup>13</sup> In her first book, *Studies of the Eighteenth Century in Italy* (London: W. Satchell, 1880), Lee mentions the ‘Spanish drama of the days of Lope de Vega’ (p. 4), his ‘ferocious *Fuenteovejuna*’ (p. 166), and ‘the plays of Calderon’ (p. 169), among others.

‘The Gimenezes turned up from Perugia last month and are a great gain; Mr Gimenez’s Spanish ghost stories, with appropriate grimaces, are wonderful; it makes you feel as if you were tumbling into crypts.’<sup>14</sup> This Spanish ghost-storyteller was a prominent statesman and diplomat, also involved in the most relevant schools of literature and thought of mid and late nineteenth-century Spain whose importance, even in his home country, has unjustly faded today.

Born in the southern Andalusian city of Granada, Fernández Giménez joined the Post-Romantic movement known as *La Cuerda Granadina* (1850–1854) during his youth, formed by a group of young men that played an instrumental role in Andalusian culture of the mid-nineteenth century.<sup>15</sup> One of the most prominent members of this group was Pedro Antonio de Alarcón (1833–1891), the realist author and Fernández Giménez’s most intimate friend. During this time in Granada, Fernández Giménez wrote four plays: *Ibon el sepulturero* (date unknown), *Contra amor no hay resistencia* (c. 1851), *Juan de Lanuza* (c. 1851) and *Una esposa para un rey* (1853), and contributed to several periodicals, such as *El Eco de Occidente*, *La Alhambra*, *El Belén*, and *La Soberanía Nacional*. By the mid-1850s, Fernández Giménez had graduated in Law, was well-versed in European literature and art and knew Latin, Greek, French and Arabic. For the members of *La Cuerda*, Fernández Giménez came to be known as ‘Moro’ or ‘The Moor’, due to his interest in Arab subjects, a fact that would later become instrumental in Lee’s perception of Spain. He was also regarded as one of the most studious of all the members of *La Cuerda*, as

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<sup>14</sup> Vernon Lee, *Selected Letters of Vernon Lee, 1856–1935*, ed. by Amanda Gagel (Abingdon: Routledge, 2017), i, p. 239.

<sup>15</sup> All the biographical information on Fernández Giménez comes from the documents and correspondence that I unearthed in the family archive. See footnote 9 in this chapter.

‘imaginative’ and engaging, and as possessing a ‘completely original oratorical power’.<sup>16</sup>

In the 1850s Fernández Giménez moved to Madrid, where he pursued a career in politics for the following eighteen years. In Madrid, he established friendships with renowned literary figures of the time, such as Juan Valera (1824–1905), a Spanish realist author, diplomat, and politician. José Zorrilla (1817–1893), the Spanish Romantic poet and dramatist, whose famous play *Don Juan Tenorio* (1844) is still studied today in schools in Spain, was another of Fernández Giménez’s intimate friends. During his youth in Granada and his later years in central Madrid he thus became acquainted with the most relevant figures of mid and late nineteenth-century literary movements in Spain.

In 1868, Fernández Giménez was appointed first Secretary of the Spanish Embassy in the Vatican, where he took charge of the candidacy of the Duke of Aosta (1845–1890, later King Amadeo I of Spain) to the Spanish throne. With the proclamation of the First Spanish Republic in 1873, the relations between the Spanish Government and the Vatican were suspended and Fernández Giménez left his post, although he continued to carry out diplomatic duties unofficially. It was during this period that he met Vernon Lee, with whom he would have a close friendship for at least a decade. In 1883 Fernández Giménez returned to Spain, as he was appointed Director-General of Public Administration under the government of the renowned politician Práxedes Mateo Sagasta, who also appointed him Subsecretary of State in 1888.<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> José Cascales Muñoz and Manuel León Sánchez, *Antología de la Cuerda Granadina* (México: Ediciones León Sánchez, 1928), p. 135; ‘El país pintado por sí mismo’, *El Imparcial*, 1 April 1868, p. 1. My translation from the Spanish: ‘[Fernández Giménez] es un orador completamente original’.

<sup>17</sup> Práxedes Mariano Mateo Sagasta y Escolar (1825–1903) was a Spanish politician who served as Prime Minister on eight occasions between 1870 and 1902 — always in charge of the Liberal Party. A Freemason, he was known for possessing an excellent oratorical talent.

While primarily a statesman, Fernández Giménez remained committed to the arts throughout his life, as his engagement with the main and most progressive Spanish cultural institutions of the time testifies. One of these institutions was the *Ateneo de Madrid* ['Athenaeum of Madrid'], a private cultural and literary society originally founded in 1835, after the absolutist monarch Ferdinand VII's death. Fernández Giménez spoke for the first time in the *Ateneo* in 1861, after which his reputation as a remarkable orator was immediately established: the progressive periodical *El Contemporáneo* wrote after Fernández Giménez's first speech that 'for his abundant expressive ease, his learning, and the novelty and daring of some of his ideas, one could call him brilliant.'<sup>18</sup> He continued to lecture on aesthetics in the *Ateneo* for several years, and taught courses on Islamic art in 1868 and 1869, and on painting between 1897 and 1903.

Fernández Giménez was, also, closely linked to the Free Institute of Education [*Institución Libre de Enseñanza*]. Founded in 1876 against a background of repression and the reimposition of state-controlled education during the Bourbon Restoration, the Institute was a private institution independent from Church and State. It was established to create an alternative to the higher education system of official Catholic Spain. The institute aimed to provide a rational humanist education for a modernising elite. Its *Residencia de Estudiantes* [Student Accommodation] was later to become the Madrid home of Spain's most famous twentieth-century artists and writers, such as Luis Buñuel, Federico García Lorca, and Salvador Dalí. Fernández Giménez's progressive mind and humanist views on philosophy and aestheticism influenced the founder of the Institute and his successor, Francisco Giner de los Ríos (1839–1915)

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<sup>18</sup> 'Gacetilla de la capital', *El Contemporáneo*, 26 February 1861, p. 3. My translation from the Spanish: 'El joven D. José Fernández Giménez [pronunció] un discurso que, por la facilidad y abundancia de la expresión, por la copia de doctrina y por la novedad y atrevimiento de algunas ideas, se puede calificar de brillante.'



and Manuel Bartolomé Cossío (1857–1935), respectively, who regarded him as a ‘maestro’ or ‘master’.<sup>19</sup> Fernández Giménez had taught art history in the Lyceum of Granada to Giner de los Ríos in the 1850s and exerted a definite influence upon him. During the late 1870s, Fernández Giménez lectured in the institution, taught courses on art and published several articles in the Institute’s publication. As a result of his involvement with these institutions, he came to be regarded as a renowned scholar on aesthetics and art.<sup>20</sup>

Fernández Giménez was able to commit himself fully to his lifelong passion from 1896, when he abandoned a forty-year career in politics. In some of the letters he exchanged with some of his closest friends, Fernández Jiménez showed his disappointment with the state of politics in Spain and its level of corruption. Appointed director of the recently founded Museum of Modern Art in Madrid in 1896, he was responsible for the Spanish pavilion at the Exposition Universelle of 1900 in Paris. During his time as director of the museum, he met notable Spanish contemporary artists, such as Aureliano de Beruete (1845–1912), Rogelio de Egusquiza (1845–1915), and Alejo Vera (1834–1923). Fernández Giménez was then writing his life’s work, a book on the art history of The Alhambra, which he never finished.

Lee was immediately drawn to Fernández Giménez because of his eclectic nature and widespread interests in art and aesthetics. Desmond MacCarthy wrote of Lee that ‘the difficulty of writing about her is that she is such a various author [...] she is an essayist who is at once an aesthete, a psychologist and an historian’ and that ‘her work is a rare combination of intellectual curiosity and imaginative sensibility.’<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> Manuel Bartolomé Cossío to José Fernández Giménez, [1890], Jose Fernández Giménez Archive, DC2, F23, Private Collection, Fort Collins, Colorado, USA.

<sup>20</sup> Marcelino Menéndez Pelayo, *Historia De Las Ideas Estéticas En España*, 5 vols. (Madrid: Consejo Superior de Investigaciones Científicas, 1962), v, p. 458.

<sup>21</sup> Desmond MacCarthy, ‘Out of the Limelight (Vernon Lee)’, *Humanities* (London: MacGibbon & Kee, 1953), p. 189.

Like Vernon Lee, José Fernández Giménez was a polymath: at once an aesthete, a playwright, art critic, historian, diplomat, politician and museum director.

Shortly after their first acquaintance in 1878, Fernández Giménez became indispensable to Vernon Lee for, as she later put it, his ‘wonderful, energetic, imaginative power of thought’.<sup>22</sup> They met at a pivotal moment, when Lee was searching for a method of aesthetic measurement that could be applied universally, across the disciplines. Only a few months after meeting, Lee lamented the absence of the Spanish intellectual in Italy: ‘The Gimenezes, to my great sorrow, are in Spain’, she wrote to the author and translator Linda Villari on 7 June 1879, and immediately initiated a correspondence with him.<sup>23</sup> The role of mentor that Lee bestowed upon Fernández Giménez and the deep influence that the Spaniard exerted on Lee’s early work on aesthetics is clear in two unpublished and newly discovered letters, and in some of Lee’s unpublished *Autobiographical Notes* dated 1880–1884.

In one of these letters, dated 22 July 1880, questioned by Lee on his opinion on the current philosophical debate, Fernandez Giménez wrote that: ‘Regarding Spencer and Comte, while denying metaphysics, they create another metaphysics: Comte, because he affirms freely and dogmatically an objective knowledge. Spencer because he gives at least implicitly a real and absolute value to the realm of thought under which he built the science.’<sup>24</sup> Lee’s reply is much more elaborate and longer than that of Fernández Giménez, which testifies her eagerness to engage in an intellectual debate with him:

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<sup>22</sup> Vernon Lee, *Autobiographical Notes*, 16 January 1884, Collection of Vernon Lee Materials, Colby College Special Collections, Waterville, Maine, USA.

<sup>23</sup> Lee, *Selected Letters of Vernon Lee*, 2017, p. 248.

<sup>24</sup> José Fernández Giménez and Leila de Giménez to Vernon Lee, Zarauz, 22 July 1880, Collection of Vernon Lee Materials, Colby College Special Collections, Waterville, Maine, USA. My transcription and translation from the French: ‘Quant à Spencer et Comte, tout en niant la métaphysique, ils ‘en font une autre métaphysique: Comte, parce qu’il affirme gratuitement et dogmatiquement la connaissance objective. Spencer parce qu’il donne au moins implicitement une valeur réelle et absolue aux lois de la pensée en vertu desquelles il bâtit la science.’

As to Spencer, of whom I have mostly read the psychology, he has a very special attraction for me because of the explanation he gives of secondary phenomena; but I understand immediately your observations on his manners of skipping over what is unachievable, he jumps so nimbly over the abyss that separates physical existence from conscious state, that we can hardly be aware of it at first, but if one comes back to it, the abyss is no less deep for it. Spencer seems to me to suppress the phenomena of the consciousness; one doesn't know how to tie in the altogether physical laws that he pushes at first with totally logical laws to which he goes on next. And yet, in this philosophy of Spencer there is the impression of being the true one which captivates my mind: if one could use it to explain a part of things, without wanting to duplicate the existence of those that the philosophy cannot explain. Especially concerning that which relates to art, Spencer seems to me to have given precious information about the basis of his artistic pleasures. But that his philosophy can explain art itself, as different from its basis, that's what really preoccupies my mind: it seems to me that he is always concerned with the element that constitutes art but he never gets to art itself. That this physiological psychology can explain the phenomena of artistic pleasure, that's what I cannot accept, something is certainly missing; on the other hand, confining these phenomena to a sort of mysticism like that of Victor Cousin and Hegel, seems totally impossible to me.<sup>25</sup>

This letter unveils the key role that Fernández Giménez played as a catalyst for Lee's emerging ideas about physiological aesthetics, which at the time were associated with Comte's social evolutionism and Spencer's evolutionary psychology.<sup>26</sup> Fernández

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<sup>25</sup> Vernon Lee to José Fernández Giménez, Bagni di Lucca, 1 September 1880, Jose Fernández Giménez Archive, DC2, F39, Private Collection, Fort Collins, Colorado, USA. My transcription and translation from the French: 'Quant à Spencer, dont j'ai lu sur toute la psychologie, il a pour moi un attrait tout particulier pour l'explication qu'il donne des phénomènes secondaires; mais j'ai compris immédiatement vos observations sur sa façon d'escamoter l'insoluble; il saute si lestement l'abîme qui sépare l'existence physique de l'état conscient, qu'on ne s'en aperçoit d'abord à peine; mais si on y revient, l'abîme n'en reste pas moins profond. Spencer me semble supprimer le phénomène de la conscience; on ne sait comment relier les lois toutes physiques qu'il débite d'abord avec les lois toutes logiques aux quelles il passe ensuite. Et cependant il y a dans cette philosophie de Spencer un air d'être la véritable qui me subjugue l'esprit: si on pouvait s'en servir pour expliquer une partie des choses vouloir pour cela répéter l'existence de celles que cette philosophie ne peut expliquer. Surtout dans ce qui a rapport à l'art, Spencer me semble avoir donné de précieux renseignements sur la base de ses jouissances artistiques. Mais que sa philosophie explique l'art même, en tant que différent de sa base, c'est ci qui m'occupe beaucoup l'esprit: il me semble toujours occupé des éléments qui constituent l'art, mais ne jamais arriver à l'art même que cette psychologie donne l'explication des phénomènes de la jouissance artistique, c'est que je ne puis admettre, quelque chose y manque, à coup sur; d'autre part, reléguer ces phénomènes à une sorte de mysticité comme celle de Victor Cousin et d'Hegel, cela me semble bien impossible.'

<sup>26</sup> For more on physiological aesthetics see Grant Allen's *Physiological Aesthetics* (1877), dedicated to Herbert Spencer. When Allen published the volume he was a relatively unknown writer. For a more in-depth look at Lee's reception of these ideas and on her psychological aesthetics, see Carolyn Burdett,

Giménez accentuated Lee's own aesthetics, encouraged her thinking, and directly influenced her writing. In this same letter, Lee enclosed her recently published article 'Comparative Aesthetics' (*The Contemporary Review*, August 1880), concerning 'a subject about which we have often chatted together and on which I learned much from you.'<sup>27</sup> In her personal notes Lee would later write that she was under the 'strong influence' of Fernández Giménez when she 'took down the notes for that paper.'<sup>28</sup>

In this article, Lee criticised the major writers on aesthetics from Winckelmann, Lessing, and Hegel to Taine and Ruskin, for considering art 'a shapeless, lawless fluid' which 'has no shape of its own but assumes the shape of the vessel, of the civilization wherein it is contained.'<sup>29</sup> For Lee, on the contrary, art 'is an organic psycho-mental entity, whose forms depend not upon coercion from without, but upon growth from within.'<sup>30</sup> The civilisation by which art is surrounded, she argued, 'is not a vessel which imprisons and shapes [...] it is simply the soil in which the seed is cast, and the climate in which the seed quickens; for the art, like the plant, has an organism of its own, which the soil and climate may affect and modify but cannot change.'<sup>31</sup> Central to all appreciation is form: 'the mental combination of lines, colours or sounds of which the concrete works of art are but the visible and lifeless image.'<sup>32</sup>

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"The subjective inside us can turn into the objective outside": Vernon Lee's Psychological Aesthetics', *19: Interdisciplinary Studies in the Long Nineteenth Century*, 12 (2011) <<http://doi.org/10.16995/ntn.610>>.

<sup>27</sup> Lee to Fernández Giménez, Bagni di Lucca, Italy, 1 September 1880, Jose Fernández Giménez Archive, DC2, F39, Private Collection, Fort Collins, Colorado, USA. My transcription and translation from the French: 'Il s'agit d'ailleurs d'un sujet dont nous avons bien souvent causé ensemble et sur lequel j'ai appris beaucoup de vous.'

<sup>28</sup> Vernon Lee, *Autobiographical Notes*, 16 January 1884, Collection of Vernon Lee Materials, Colby College Special Collections, Waterville, Maine, USA.

<sup>29</sup> Vernon Lee, 'Comparative Aesthetics', *The Contemporary Review*, August 1880, p. 306.

<sup>30</sup> Lee, 'Comparative Aesthetics', p. 306.

<sup>31</sup> Lee, 'Comparative Aesthetics', p. 306.

<sup>32</sup> Lee, 'Comparative Aesthetics', p. 304.

Fernández Giménez was a recognised scholar of aesthetics and an active lecturer on art, but he did not publish much work on the subject, thus making it difficult to grasp his own understanding of aestheticism. One can, however, gather some information about Fernández Giménez's aesthetic thought from pieces such as 'On Christian-Muslim Architecture', published in 1862 in the periodical *El Arte en España*, and 'Fine Arts in Spain', published in *Revista Hispano-Americana* in 1867. Some of these early essays on art show certain correspondences with the ideas Lee unfolded in the essay 'Comparative Aesthetics'. In 1862, for instance, Fernández Giménez wrote:

All of the arts [...] conceal a representation of character and predominant taste of the century in which they flourished; but such an intimate, mysterious representation, of such a nature, repulses analysis and does not admit further explanation than the one that, by sentiment, dimly allows the understanding of art in itself.<sup>33</sup>

Fernández Giménez alludes here to the duality of the aesthetic experience that so interested Lee and, more importantly, to the 'sentiment' that is needed in order to fully comprehend art. Fernández Giménez elaborated this idea in the article 'Fine Arts in Spain', published in 1867. For the Spanish scholar, there are two types of painting: one which, although widely considered a masterpiece, may or may not 'elevate' us, and another which, whatever the critics may say, has the ability to move us. In short, Fernández Giménez describes two key aesthetic experiences for Lee: one intellectual and one emotional. 'Art is at the same time two very different things: it is the product of a given mental condition, and it is the producer of another mental condition', stated

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<sup>33</sup> José Fernández Giménez, 'De la arquitectura cristiano-mahometana', *El Arte en España*, January 1862, p. 118. My translation from the Spanish: 'Todas las artes [...] encierran una representación del carácter y aficiones predominantes del siglo en que florecieron; pero representación tan íntima, tan misteriosa, de naturaleza tal, en fin, que repugna el análisis y no admite más explicación que la que por sentimiento y vagamente deja comprender el arte mismo.'

Lee in her 'Comparative Aesthetics', along the same lines that Fernández Giménez developed in his 'Fine Arts in Spain'.<sup>34</sup>

In allusion to the 'emotional' experience, Fernández Giménez wrote that 'the painting whose possession one desires with real interest is not one of those many which are exhibited to the public contemplation'. Rather, he continues, it is that in which the spectator finds 'an ideal conformity'; that which, 'conceived with a sentiment similar in nature to his own, elevates him to a more serene realm than that of reality, making him see the same reality and in the form that touches him the most, but transfigured, purified and clean of all shameful, inopportune or repugnant accident.' The painting whose possession one desires is, he concludes, 'that which offers his fantasy the world he had desired in order to seek refuge from time to time and to rest from common life, and from the world he had not been able to imagine in a clear and permanent way until finding it represented by the magic brush of the artist.'<sup>35</sup>

The 'intellectual' work of art is then described by Fernández Giménez: 'On the other hand, the painting of a more elevated genre, for all that the spectator admires it as a man of erudition, is almost always indifferent towards him. Conceived in another sphere, superior if you please, it does not descend to the reality in which we live today in order to transfigure and embellish it.' As a result, he writes, it is the spectator's task to 'make an effort, if he wants to fully penetrate the depths of the work; for him to

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<sup>34</sup> Lee, 'Comparative Aesthetics', p. 300.

<sup>35</sup> José Fernández Giménez, 'Las Bellas Artes en España', *Revista Hispano-Americana*, 28 February 1867, p. 119. My translation from the Spanish: 'El cuadro cuya posesión se desea con verdadero interés, no es uno cualquiera de los muchos expuestos a la contemplación pública: es aquel precisamente, y no otro, en que el espectador encuentra una conformidad ideal; aquel que, concebido al calor de un sentimiento de igual naturaleza que el suyo, le eleva a una región más serena que la realidad, haciéndole ver la realidad misma y en la forma que más de cerca le hiere, pero transfigurada, depurada y limpia de todo accidente embarazoso, inoportuno o repugnante; aquel, en fin, que ofrece a su fantasía el mundo que había deseado para refugiarse en él de vez en cuando a descansar de la vida común y el cual no había conseguido imaginar de una manera clara y permanente hasta hallarlo representado por el pincel mágico del artista.'

forget his everyday feelings, if he wants to identify himself with those which inspired the artist; and lastly, for him to take on an extraordinary and artificial willingness.’<sup>36</sup>

Here Fernández Giménez is developing similar ideas to those that Lee would, twenty years later, expound in her ‘Comparative Aesthetics’. Lee’s ‘organic psycho-mental entity, whose forms depend not upon coercion from without, but upon growth from within’ recalls the art that ‘conceived with a sentiment similar in nature to his own, elevates him to a more serene realm than that of reality, making him see the same reality and in the form that touches him the most’, which the Spanish art critic praises above the purely ‘intellectual’ artwork.

These aesthetic ideas that Fernández Giménez shared with Lee were framed within a renewed school of thought that emerged in Spain in the late 1860s. This new Spanish intellectual elite rejected political corruption, formal religion, and utilitarianism, and attempted to revitalise Spanish culture and philosophy. Writers and artists aspired to find a balance in their works between other European influences and Spanish ideas. Alongside institutions like the Athenaeum and the Free Institute of Education, scholars attempted to establish the respectability of the intellectual in political and social life. It is, crucially, within this enabling context that a dynamic Spanish aesthetic school emerged in the 1860s. The Hispanist Samuel Gili Gaya has highlighted the impressive number of books and articles on aesthetics published in Spain during the second half of the nineteenth century.<sup>37</sup> The best representative of this school was to be Marcelino Menéndez Pelayo (1856–1912) — a friend of

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<sup>36</sup> Fernández Giménez, ‘Las Bellas Artes en España’, p. 120. My translation from the Spanish: ‘En cambio, el cuadro de más elevado género, por mucho que admire el espectador, como erudito, le es casi siempre en cierto modo indiferente. Concebido en otra esfera, muy superior si se quiere, no desciende hasta la realidad en que hoy vivimos para transfigurarla y embellecerla; es menester que el espectador se esfuerce, si ha de llegar a la altura de la obra; que olvide sus sentimientos habituales, si ha de identificarse con los que animaron al artista; y finalmente, que se coloque en una disposición de ánimo extraordinaria y artificial.’

<sup>37</sup> Samuel Gili Gaya, *Sobre La ‘Historia De Las Ideas Estéticas En España’ de Menéndez Pelayo* (Santander: Sociedad Menéndez y Pelayo, 1956), p. 11.

Fernández Giménez — who published between 1881 and 1891 the first *Historia de las ideas estéticas en España* [*History of Aesthetics in Spain*], an extensive exposition of Spanish aestheticism. Through Fernández Giménez, this relatively unknown school of thought became vital for Vernon Lee's early aesthetics.

We encounter many more signs of Fernández Giménez's direct influence in Lee's notes and published work. Six months after the letter mentioned above, on 11 December 1880, Lee registered in her notes the following passage:

Whole generations have been doomed at times to moral terror and evil: the sense of this first came strongly upon me when writing my first Renaissance paper ['The Artistic Dualism in the Renaissance', *The Contemporary Review*, September 1879]. It may sound a ridiculous contradiction but to me it is nevertheless certain that there is both necessity and Free Will: the one perceived by the reason, the other felt by the moral side of us.<sup>38</sup>

After expounding her argument, Lee placed Fernández Giménez at the centre of it: 'This strange mysterious dualism throughout things, this standing of a vague Fatum behind the throne of an omnipotent force is an idea which I never found understood except by José Gimenez, to whom I owe the above image.'<sup>39</sup> Not only did she recognise the instrumental role the Spanish intellectual played in the development of her ideas for the Renaissance paper, but she went on to write that:

José Gimenez is the only person, whether in human or in book shape, with whom I have ever met a mental tendency in all matters extremely like my own: the reason is perhaps, for his being the only man whose opinion has weight for me: it is like a second myself; like my own more mature judgment, correcting my less mature ideas.<sup>40</sup>

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<sup>38</sup> Vernon Lee, *Autobiographical Notes*, 11 December 1880, Collection of Vernon Lee Materials, Colby College Special Collections, Waterville, Maine, USA.

<sup>39</sup> Lee, *Autobiographical Notes*, 11 December 1880, Collection of Vernon Lee Materials, Colby College Special Collections, Waterville, Maine, USA.

<sup>40</sup> Lee, *Autobiographical Notes*, 11 December 1880, Collection of Vernon Lee Materials, Colby College Special Collections, Waterville, Maine, USA.



As a ‘second herself’ whose ‘more mature judgement’ served Lee as a mentor figure, it is unsurprising that Fernández Giménez was uppermost in Lee’s thought and writing during her first visit to London in 1881, following the success of *Studies of the Eighteenth Century in Italy*. In that first visit to London, Lee was introduced to most theorists and followers of the controversial ‘art for art’s sake’ movement whose work she had known. Lee’s early commitment to these principles began to be challenged in this visit. She soon became critical, as Christa Zorn notes, ‘of the artists’ affectation, “mutual admiration”, and latent erotic strain.’<sup>41</sup>

One of the targets of her harsh criticism was the English poet and critic Theodore Watts-Dunton (1832–1914), whom Lee described in 1883 as ‘a little figure, black coat, pearl grey trousers, white gaiters & white hat, & fierce moustaches — a matador out for a Sunday.’<sup>42</sup> The Spanish word ‘matador’ — a bullfighter whose task is to kill the bull by a sword thrust between the shoulder blades — helped Lee to express her aversion towards what she perceived to be the superficiality of particular members of the Aesthetic movement: those who, in her opinion, were ‘killing’ the movement. The Spanish-like author reminded Lee of her friend back at home, Fernández Giménez, but without his qualities: ‘he impressed me as mediocre & self sufficient, & a painful, slow, caddish professional caricature of Gimenez.’<sup>43</sup> Years later, in July 1885, Lee showed again her discomfort with the affectation of Watts-Dunton, who could not achieve the genuine candour of his Spanish friend: ‘I think the

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<sup>41</sup> Christa Zorn, *Vernon Lee: Aesthetics, History, and the Victorian Female Intellectual* (Athens, Ohio: Ohio University Press, 2003), p. 126.

<sup>42</sup> Vernon Lee to Matilda Paget, Kensington, 2 July 1883, Collection of Vernon Lee Materials, Colby College Special Collections, Waterville, Maine, USA.

<sup>43</sup> Lee to Matilda Paget, Kensington, 9 July 1883, Collection of Vernon Lee Materials, Colby College Special Collections, Waterville, Maine, USA.

little man decided to be frigid. When one is so small, & such a comic failure at being a mustachio'd Gimenez, it isn't so easy to be frigid.'<sup>44</sup>

Another member of the Aesthetic set who suffered Lee's initial disapproval was Walter Pater (1839–1894), who would later, nonetheless, become one of the most determining influences on Lee's aesthetic career. Once again, Lee used a Spanish figure to describe an English Aesthete. When Lee described Pater to her mother in 1881 she compared him to the portraits of Philip IV by the painter Diego Velázquez: 'He is a heavy, shy, dull looking brown mustachiod [*sic*] creature, over forty, much like Velasquez's Philip IV, lymphatic, dull, humourless.'<sup>45</sup> Lee was being a little disingenuous here — the comparison is rather unfortunate — but, when reading this description more closely, we may find not so much an implicit critique of Pater, but the contrary. Velázquez may present Philip IV as a dull character, but the painting *is* a vivid work of art. The 'flashy' Watts-Dunton is described as a funny caricature, whereas the 'dull' Pater is compared to a masterpiece. The figure of the bullfighter, her 'authentic' Spanish friend Giménez, and the dark figures of the Spanish Baroque of Velázquez — which I fully explore in the second chapter of this thesis — allowed Lee to articulate her feelings towards key figures of the Aesthetic movement in Britain. At the same time, Lee's inclusion of Spanish cultural icons in her letters demonstrates her profound engagement with the country.

Fernández Giménez also played an instrumental role in Lee's next book, *Belcaro* (1881) which marks the beginning of her writing on aesthetics. In the opening chapter of *Belcaro* Vernon Lee announced her resolution to abandon history for aesthetics; facts for ideas. Vineta Colby argues that Lee chose the essay genre because

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<sup>44</sup> Lee to Matilda Paget, Kensington, 15 July 1885, Collection of Vernon Lee Materials, Colby College Special Collections, Waterville, Maine, USA.

<sup>45</sup> Lee to Matilda Paget, Oxford, 18 July 1881, Collection of Vernon Lee Materials, Colby College Special Collections, Waterville, Maine, USA.

it gave her freedom to move between imagination and reality.<sup>46</sup> In the opening of *Belcaro*, Vernon Lee proclaims the birth of a ‘new myself’, descending from her ‘magisterial chair or stool of 18th century-expounder’ and ‘humbly gone to school as a student of aesthetics.’<sup>47</sup> From then on, her own artistic philosophy would therefore be ‘simply to try and enjoy in art what art really contains, to obtain from art all that it can give, by refraining from asking it to give what it cannot.’<sup>48</sup> The afternoon in which she came up with the idea of assembling her essays in a book to register her transformation is described both in the book itself and in her unpublished *Autobiographical Notes*: the memory of a December afternoon drive to the Italian castle of Belcaro, ‘the strange, isolated villa castle, up and down, and round and round the hills of ploughed-up russet earth, and pale pink leafless brushwood.’<sup>49</sup> What Lee did not reproduce in the published book but did in her unpublished notes is that ‘Gimenez’s ghost stories’ were also part of the bucolic scene.<sup>50</sup>

This omission is crucial for an understanding of the construction of Lee’s sense of self at the time. In *Belcaro* she explicated:

I have always, in putting together these notes, had a vision of pictures or statues or places [...] I have always thought, in arranging these discussions, of the real individuals with whom I should most willingly have them: I have always felt that some one else was by my side to whom I was showing, explaining, answering; hence, the use of the second person plural [...] it is not the oracular *we* of the printed book, it is the *we* of myself and those with whom, for whom, I am speaking; it is the constantly felt dualism of myself and my companion.<sup>51</sup>

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<sup>46</sup> Vineta Colby, *Vernon Lee: A Literary Biography* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2003), p. 82.

<sup>47</sup> Vernon Lee, *Belcaro: Being Essays on Sundry Aesthetical Questions* (London: W. Satchell, 1881), pp. 4–5.

<sup>48</sup> Lee, *Belcaro*, p. 13.

<sup>49</sup> Lee, *Belcaro*, p. 2.

<sup>50</sup> Vernon Lee, *Autobiographical Notes*, December 1880, Collection of Vernon Lee Materials, Colby College Special Collections, Waterville, Maine, USA.

<sup>51</sup> Lee, *Belcaro*, p. 8.

Vineta Colby has argued that the radical transformation from scholar to student, from an old to a ‘new myself’, parallels a similar awakening in Lee’s personal life: ‘an open acknowledgement of her attachment to Mary Robinson’, to whom Lee dedicated *Belcaro*.<sup>52</sup> The poet A. Mary F. Robinson (1857–1944), writes Colby, was Lee’s ‘other self’.<sup>53</sup> Robinson was Lee’s ‘other self’, but Fernández Giménez was Lee’s ‘second myself’ — her own more mature judgment, correcting her less mature ideas, as mentioned above.<sup>54</sup> After finding her ‘second myself’ in Fernández Giménez, Lee was able to construct a ‘new myself’, accompanied by her ‘other self’, Robinson. The Spanish art critic thus exerted a fundamental influence on Lee’s early representation of her identity. As Lee did later in her life, she had found then a lover — an other — in the figure of a woman, but a replica of herself and also a mentor in the figure of a man. Other male individuals have been pointed out as having influenced Lee, such as Walter Pater, Henry James, or Carlo Placci. The Spanish art critic Fernández Giménez needs to be added to that list.

In this context, one of the essays included in *Belcaro*, ‘A Dialogue on Poetic Morality’, appears in a different light: a metaphorical vision of Lee and Fernández Giménez’s mentor-pupil relationship at the time. The debate, conducted between a young poet (Cyril) and an older mentor figure (Baldwin), discusses the place of art in relation to morality and duty. Cyril laments that poets of today are no longer legislators of the world as in the time of Shelley, but merely writers for leisurely intellectual elites. Baldwin explains that there are two things to do in this (modern) world: to

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<sup>52</sup> Colby, *Vernon Lee*, p. 55.

<sup>53</sup> Colby, *Vernon Lee*, p. 55.

<sup>54</sup> Lee, *Autobiographical Notes*, 11 December 1880, Collection of Vernon Lee Materials, Colby College Special Collections, Waterville, Maine, USA.

destroy evil and to create good. Science and most practical occupations aim to destroy evil and art creates good.<sup>55</sup>

Some of these affirmations echo Lee's unpublished later notes in which she recalls a conversation with Fernández Giménez; the aesthetics of duality is central to this conversation. Discussing different ways of representing the struggle of good against evil with the Spanish intellectual, Lee came to the conclusion that there are two separate means by which to do so: 'One consists in playing these two forces [...] opposite to one another in a single individual; the other in personifying each separately; a struggle between the two halves of one nature or between two opposed natures. Of the two methods, the first gives us perhaps the most valuable psychological results,' concluded Lee.<sup>56</sup> These notes register Lee and Fernández Giménez's debates on the dualistic nature of fiction, in the same manner that in 'A Dialogue on Poetic Morality' Cyril and Baldwin discussed the morality of poetry.

Two years after *Belcaro*, in 1883, Vernon Lee published her first attempt at adult fiction, *Ottolie: An Eighteenth Century Idyl*, and was completing her first novel *Miss Brown*, published in 1884. She was eager for Fernández Giménez's opinion: during her third visit to London during that year, in July 1883, she enquired to her mother twice about the Spanish critic: 'Let me know whether Gimenez has answered.'<sup>57</sup>

Fernández Giménez, who was not in Florence at the time, but in Belgirate, finally answered Lee's brother, Eugene Lee-Hamilton (1845–1907); he apologised for not having replied earlier and not having been able to talk to his sister, after which he

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<sup>55</sup> Lee, *Belcaro*, pp. 235–50.

<sup>56</sup> Vernon Lee, *Autobiographical Notes*, 31 December 1884, Collection of Vernon Lee Materials, Colby College Special Collections, Waterville, Maine, USA.

<sup>57</sup> Lee to Matilda Paget, 13 July 1883, Collection of Vernon Lee Materials, Colby College Special Collections, Waterville, Maine, USA.

continued to praise the ‘very favourable reception’ in England of Vernon Lee’s last book ‘which, nonetheless, doesn’t surprise me’ and promised to try and talk with her in person as soon as possible.<sup>58</sup> This carelessness on Fernández Giménez’s part would eventually take a toll on Lee. In a letter to Robinson, dated 25 April 1884, Lee lamented: ‘I believe he [Fernández Giménez] cares not a straw for me, nor do I care personally for him.’ Nonetheless, she admitted, ‘I admire his marvellous intellect & strange personality, & I feel grateful for the great use which he was to me, greater use than any other man, almost than any books.’<sup>59</sup>

This dual combination of ‘intellect’ and ‘strange personality’ had been crucial for Lee’s work on aesthetics, and it would be even more fundamental for her fiction. As well as a respected intellectual, Fernández Giménez was a renowned storyteller — a fitting combination for Lee, who was herself an essayist interested in experimenting with fiction and would eventually master the genre known as the ‘psychological supernatural’. In May 1884, Lee confessed to Robinson that, ‘Time spent near Gimenez is no waste for me.’<sup>60</sup> And, indeed, in her notes later in the year, Lee recorded one of her conversations with Fernández Giménez: ‘Thinking, as I constantly? continually do now, of novels I, talking yesterday with Giménez [...] came up with [the notion] of evil in fiction.’<sup>61</sup> The dialectic of good versus evil, the weaving of the real and the supernatural, were a constant in her conversations with Fernández Giménez.

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<sup>58</sup> José Fernández Giménez to Eugene Lee-Hamilton, 18 July 1883, Papers of Vernon Lee, Box V, Special Collections, Somerville College Library, Oxford. My transcription and translation from the French: ‘Je suis très heureux d’apprendre que le nouveau livre de Madame votre sœur a été très favorablement revu pour le public littéraire anglais, ce qui, du reste, ne m’étonnement nullement, connoissant les qualités extraordinaires de l’ont sœur.’

<sup>59</sup> Lee, *Selected Letters of Vernon Lee*, 2017, p. 526.

<sup>60</sup> Lee, *Selected Letters of Vernon Lee*, 2017, p. 532.

<sup>61</sup> Vernon Lee, *Autobiographical Notes*, 31 December 1884, Collection of Vernon Lee Materials, Colby College Special Collections, Waterville, Maine, USA.

These discussions with Fernández Giménez on morality in fiction were, also, a reflection of Lee's own growing ethical consciousness: from the mid-1880s on, Lee's aesthetic philosophy became increasingly preoccupied with social and political issues. Lee's new ethical conscience paralleled her deepening disillusion with the 'art for art's sake' movement. Disappointed with the posturing of some Aesthetes and their followers, Lee, who had earlier rejected art critics' influential pronouncements on the moral and religious function of beauty, began to feel a moral necessity to involve herself in social issues, which she would reflect in *Juvenilia: Essays on Sundry Aesthetical Questions* (1887). Although the essays in this collection revert to familiar themes, Vineta Colby writes, the voice is 'less strident, sobered by a sense that the beauty she celebrates cannot be enjoyed by everyone and is increasingly jeopardized by modern industrial society.'<sup>62</sup>

Once more, the figure of Fernández Giménez appears in the volume. Lee dedicated an essay therein to the iconic Spanish figure of Don Juan: 'Don Juan (con Stenterello)'. 'That legend', wrote Lee, 'so intensely national, and which has yet imposed itself upon the imagination of the whole world; upon that great sinner who descended to damnation in an apotheosis of poetry and music.'<sup>63</sup> Out of all the existent versions of the legend of Don Juan, Lee narrated only those in which the great sinner redeems himself — which perhaps served purely aesthetic precepts — but one may wonder if she was also trying to offer a more moralistic position. Lee appropriated both the figure and the legends of her Spanish friend José Fernández Giménez to create a whimsical piece packed with Spanish tropes. Lee portrayed her Spanish friend in the essay as an example of the perfect, and excessive, Spanish hidalgo: a 'hyperbolic'

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<sup>62</sup> Colby, *Vernon Lee*, p. 138.

<sup>63</sup> Vernon Lee, *Juvenilia: Essays on Sundry Aesthetical Questions*, 2 vols. (London: T. Fisher Unwin, 1887), ii, pp. 94–95.

gentleman with a big moustache, of grave and dramatic manners: ‘Don José slightly raised one thick eyebrow; he blew a great lilac smoke wreath from under his moustaches, and began his story, which he illustrated with his rapid, brusque, soberly dramatic Spanish gestures [...] Don José, looking at us with that gravity of a hidalgo by Velasquez [...]’<sup>64</sup>

Crucially, this Spanish essay represents a turning point in Lee’s writing, and highlights her move towards supernatural fiction. Lee had already set out a manifesto for the writing of supernatural fiction in ‘Faustus and Helena: Notes on the Supernatural in Art’, first published in the *Cornhill Magazine* (1880) and reprinted the following year in *Belcaro* (1881). In this essay, Lee took the story of Faust and Helen of Troy as an example of the relationship between art and the supernatural. For Lee, the story of Faust and Helen did not ‘belong’ to their most famous adapters Marlowe and Goethe, but to the legend: ‘It does not give the complete and limited satisfaction of the work of art; it has the charm of the fantastic and fitful shapes formed by the flickering firelight or the wreathing mists; it haunts like some vague strain of music, drowsily heard in half-sleep.’<sup>65</sup> For Lee, the supernatural could only truly stimulate our imagination if it was kept ambiguous and obscure. In this respect, Christa Zorn has noted how particularly in the ‘unshaped oral narratives’ of traditional folklore and legends, and not in the more finite forms of art, Lee found ‘the most powerful archetypes of the uncanny.’<sup>66</sup> For Lee, the fantastic operates as ‘a literary complement to mainstream realism’.<sup>67</sup>

Indeed, in the essay ‘Don Juan’ (1887) Lee blended the natural and the supernatural using those ‘unshaped oral narratives’ of traditional folklore, and

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<sup>64</sup> Lee, *Juvenilia*, ii, pp. 84–93.

<sup>65</sup> Lee, *Belcaro*, p. 71.

<sup>66</sup> Zorn, p. 143.

<sup>67</sup> Zorn, p. 145.



prepared the ground for her later tale ‘The Virgin of the Seven Daggers’ (1896, 1909, 1927). The essay narrates an actual event: a group of friends go to the theatre in Florence and, on their way home, one of them, Don José [Fernández Giménez] narrates the story of Don Juan.<sup>68</sup> ‘Of course there was a real Don Juan’, states Don José twice in the essay.<sup>69</sup> The word ‘real’ here is especially apposite, as we soon discover that Don Juan’s existence is obscure. Don José chooses the ‘strangest’ Spanish impersonation of Don Juan for his account, that of Francisco Velasco, ‘one of the prettiest gallants of Granada — noble, rich, handsome, witty, dare-devil, and, more-over, an admirable player on the guitar [...] a terrible fellow, who feared neither God nor the Devil.’<sup>70</sup> Velasco mends his ways when he discovers that his current mistress had died some time before their recent encounter: ‘It was she, there could be no doubt. It was that same face of strange and sinister loveliness, with the locks of black hair, paler yet, nay waxen, and already tipped with the violent tints of death.’<sup>71</sup>

Don José finished the piece with the account of Miguel de Mañara, a seventeenth-century nobleman on whom the Spanish legend of Don Juan is arguably based. Mañara repented of his sins and entered the religious order of the Caridad after meeting a funeral procession where he saw a corpse he thought looked exactly like himself. ‘Don Miguel rushes to the bier and tears off the pall. The dead man is himself!’ concluded Lee, in the perturbing style of her later supernatural tales. More precisely, Don Juan and his encounter with a mysterious supernatural woman, and the confrontation with a dead mirror-image appeared in her later tale ‘The Virgin of the Seven Daggers’. Fernández Giménez’s ambivalent personality, his intellect and his

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<sup>68</sup> Vernon Lee wrote to the novelist Henrietta Jenkin (1807–1885) about the event: ‘I want to go to see *Stenterello* here.’ My transcription. Vernon Lee to Henrietta Jenkin, Florence, 18 December 1878, Collection of Vernon Lee Materials, Colby College Special Collections, Waterville, Maine, USA.

<sup>69</sup> Lee, *Juvenilia*, ii, p. 79.

<sup>70</sup> Lee, *Juvenilia*, ii, p. 85.

<sup>71</sup> Lee, *Juvenilia*, ii, pp. 91–92.

fantasy, had shaped Lee's understanding of the duality of aesthetics — the 'intellectual' and 'emotional' experience of art — and would contour her work on the duality of fiction as a real and a supernatural space.

### **Decadent Paradoxes: 'The Virgin of the Seven Daggers'**

The very same year her essay on *Don Juan* was published (1887), Lee's intimate friend Mary Robinson got engaged to James Darmesteter. Lee was devastated and broke her relationship with her. She also decided to take a trip to Spain at the end of 1888 in an attempt to recover from the nervous breakdown she suffered after the abrupt break-up. She was accompanied by her friend Evelyn Wimbush, who was very attached to Lee but whose love was unrequited. Her emotional state and the 'dull companion' she found in Wimbush partly explain her negative response to the country.<sup>72</sup> In an entry on 2 January 1889 in her *Commonplace Book* Lee admitted that 'perhaps it is the fault of my illness that I should have received so gloomy an impression of this place & so far of Spain, that and also, in part, of the season.'<sup>73</sup>

Her specific decision to visit the southern Andalusian region was surely prompted by the recollections of her friends José Fernández Giménez and the Anglo-American painter John Singer Sargent (1856–1925). During the winter of 1879–1880 Sargent had paid an extended visit to the south of Spain, primarily in order to study the work of Diego Velázquez, a fascination that will be further explored in the second

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<sup>72</sup> Lee to Matilda Paget, 'on the steamer in the Strait' towards Spain, 26 December 1888, Collection of Vernon Lee Materials, Colby College Special Collections, Waterville, Maine, USA. Wimbush herself recorded in an undated but c. 1888 letter to Lee: 'somehow I always manage to irritate you. It makes me very sad that I do, but I admit [...] I am more stupid with you than with anyone else [...] I shall hate you being away, but it may do ya good.' Collection of Vernon Lee Materials, Colby College Special Collections, Waterville, Maine, USA.

<sup>73</sup> Lee, *Commonplace Book*, ns. 4, Collection of Vernon Lee Materials, Colby College Special Collections, Waterville, Maine, USA. In 1927 Lee also admitted that 'the nervous depression this journey was meant to cure intensified my dislike for things Spanish.' (Lee, *For Maurice*, p. xix).

chapter of this thesis. Sargent wrote to Lee after returning from Spain to recount some of his impressions, as well as to share aspects of his work on Spanish dancers.<sup>74</sup> When Lee was preparing her trip to Spain in 1888, she wrote to Sargent for advice on what to see and where to visit.<sup>75</sup>

Lee would have also kept in mind all the southern-Spanish folk tales and recollections from José Fernández Giménez, who was originally from the southern city of Granada. By the time Lee visited Spain, however, their relationship was estranged. In 1883 Fernández Giménez had moved back permanently to Spain, and their relationship had ceased to be as close. Twenty-five years later Lee bitterly recalled their distancing, defining their relationship as that of a ‘random friendship, lopsided and unaccountable as befits his country.’<sup>76</sup> Lee’s use of the adjective ‘lopsided’ seems to link the idea of asymmetry, Spain’s ‘ironical paradox’, to Fernández Giménez’s personality and to Spain itself. Notwithstanding their detachment, Fernández Giménez’s ghost stories, and even his ‘lopsided’ personality, would be in Lee’s mind throughout her journey and would appear in her work.

Lee arrived in Gibraltar in November 1888, on her way to Morocco. From Gibraltar she visited some Spanish villages. She then spent almost a month in Tangier before reaching Málaga (Spain) on 26 December 1888. Lee stayed most of her time in Spain in the city of Granada, but she also visited Málaga, Sevilla and Cádiz. She would finally spend a month in the country, until 26 January 1889, before returning to her

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<sup>74</sup> John Singer Sargent wrote to Vernon Lee on 9 July 1880 from Paris, immediately after his return from Spain, and then again on 20 November 1881, a year and a half after his return, when he still had the Spanish subjects in mind: ‘I have done several portraits and the Spanish Dancers are getting along well’, quoted in Mary Crawford-Volk, *John Singer Sargent’s El Jaleo* (Washington: National Gallery of Art, 1992), pp. 26–29.

<sup>75</sup> In 1888 Sargent wrote to Lee, responding to her request for advice on what to see in Spain: ‘At Madrid there is a little church outside the walls decorated by Goya, St. Antonio de la Florida, and some very fine Goyas at the Alameda del Duque d’Osuna’, quoted in Mary Crawford-Volk, *John Singer Sargent’s El Jaleo*, pp. 41–42.

<sup>76</sup> Lee, *The Sentimental Traveller*, p. ix.

much beloved Italy in the lowest of spirits. She could not help comparing everything to that country that she knew and adored: '[Spain] perhaps for my own fault, affects me [...] as a far less beautiful, less picturesque & distinctly uncomfortable Italy.'<sup>77</sup>

In her letters from Spain, we observe an evolution in her appreciation of the country, and her mixed feelings towards the land and its people. In a letter to her mother, dated 28–29 November 1888, Lee's first contact with Spain appears promising:

We rode through several Spanish villages, sort of horrible dust heaps; along the sea shore [...] and into a wonderful, wonderful, half hilly country, rough roads between hedges of immense aloes and prickly peas, dabbled with geraniums, here and there [...] all the rest strange arid ploughed land. [...] It was savage and beautiful.<sup>78</sup>

Lee would never again use the adjectives 'wonderful' and 'beautiful' to refer to Spain. As the days passed, her experience worsened. In another letter, dated 2 January 1889, Lee praised the 'lovely' position of the city of Granada, though she would also emphasise that, 'still, there is a horrid want of vegetation', the place is 'fearfully dull,' and the people in the streets 'the vilest I ever saw: hideous, stupid and intolerably rude. Every tenth creature is a beggar; everybody, well or ill dressed, makes faces or shouts at one, & one is mobbed by horrible imps of children.'<sup>79</sup> The maltreatment of animals in Spain also scandalised Lee and contributed to her general distaste towards a people that she would incessantly describe as 'cruel': 'The people not only jeer but amuse

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<sup>77</sup> Lee to Matilda Paget, Granada, 2 January 1889, Collection of Vernon Lee Materials, Colby College Special Collections, Waterville, Maine, USA.

<sup>78</sup> Lee to Matilda Paget, Gibraltar, 28–29 November 1888, Collection of Vernon Lee Materials, Colby College Special Collections, Waterville, Maine, USA.

<sup>79</sup> Lee to Matilda Paget, Granada, 2 January 1889, Collection of Vernon Lee Materials, Colby College Special Collections, Waterville, Maine, USA.

themselves smacking one's horse & making noises at it to get it to shy', wrote Lee.<sup>80</sup>

All, for Lee, was excess and cruelty:

'Tis the impression of a country and people without moderation [...] [with a] soul of excess [...] I began to feel it as soon as we got into that country [...] once we had left behind us the sea board, the wide valley, with its oranges [...] lemons [...] hedges of aloes [...] Nay, it struck into me before, with the sight of that cathedral of Malaga, those pillars behind upon pillars, arches on arches and architraves on architraves [...] There is a violence, a thirst for the exaggerated, [...] a desire, as it were to be bruised & stunned, or to bruise & stun others in the imagination of these people whose holidays have been auto da fés and are bullfightings. One might think that nothing short of brutality, of brutal play or brutal tragedy could affect them.<sup>81</sup>

Above all, Lee despised the hyperbolism of Spanish Catholic practices: in every church there was 'gold foil enough to make your eyes ache, & volutes, spirals, garlands, enough to make your head spin; paper flowers, chandeliers, silver... everywhere.'<sup>82</sup> The grim representations of the Virgin and of Christ disturbed her especially. 'For every Madonna with her child, for every peaceful mother you may count ten dolorosas, weeping, wringing hands, the seven daggers stuck on or near them', she annotated in her *Commonplace Book*, and continued 'on every altar, not a picture or a statue, but a monstrous painted & bedizened doll — a bleeding Christ with a velvet spangled petticoat round his loins, an enthroned Madonna in agony [...] Always dolls, and always dolls in agony.'<sup>83</sup> For Lee there was a disturbing artificiality in this extreme panegyric to death. She lamented that 'Of the delicate sweetness of medieval saintliness, nothing, and nothing, also, of the human kindliness and grace of

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<sup>80</sup> Lee to Matilda Paget, Granada, 5 January 1889, Collection of Vernon Lee Materials, Colby College Special Collections, Waterville, Maine, USA.

<sup>81</sup> Lee, *Commonplace Book*, ns. 4, Collection of Vernon Lee Materials, Colby College Special Collections, Waterville, Maine, USA.

<sup>82</sup> Lee, *Commonplace Book*, ns. 4.

<sup>83</sup> Lee, *Commonplace Book*, ns. 4.

a mother and laughing or pouting baby Christ. It is always wealth, pomp, ceremonial, and wounds and death.’<sup>84</sup>

Lee had no commitment to any religion, but she declared herself ‘an old agnostic adorer of true Catholicism’.<sup>85</sup> Another dimension of Catholicism was revealed to her, however, in Spain. Almost forty years after her visit to Spain, in the preface to the final, 1927 version of ‘The Virgin of the Seven Daggers’, Vernon Lee openly declared her detestation for those ‘Spanish cultus of death, damnation, tears and wounds’.<sup>86</sup> With this description, Lee was alluding to the French writer Auguste-Maurice Barrès’ (1862–1923) work *Du sang, de la volupté et de la mort* (1893), a passionate travel account in which Spain is portrayed as an exotic land characterised by the contrast between mysticism and voluptuousness, by the ‘pure, vital and elemental values of blood and death.’<sup>87</sup> As opposed to Arthur Symons, whose reception of Spain will be explored in the third chapter of this thesis, Lee was clearly against the French exaltation of the darkest side of Spanish life and culture, and would ironically refer to Barrès as a ‘devotee’ of Spain.<sup>88</sup>

Lee clarified that she disliked the art of the Catholic revival ‘from a temperamental intuition that there is cruelty in such mournfulness, and that cruelty is obscene’; her distaste was thus rooted on ethical principles. As Vineta Colby writes, Lee considered that ‘art is good, not because it is good in itself (though she believed this) but because its effects on us are good.’<sup>89</sup> Simply, then, Spanish Catholic art was not ‘good’ for Lee because it did not have good effects on the mind. This position fits

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<sup>84</sup> Lee, *Commonplace Book*, ns. 4.

<sup>85</sup> Lee, *For Maurice*, p. xvi.

<sup>86</sup> Lee, *For Maurice*, p. xviii.

<sup>87</sup> Pedro Carlos González Cuevas, ‘Maurice Barrès y España’, *Historia Contemporánea*, 34 (2007), 201–224 (p. 212). My translation from the Spanish: ‘los valores puramente vitales y elementales de la sangre y de la muerte.’

<sup>88</sup> Lee, *For Maurice*, p. xviii.

<sup>89</sup> Vineta Colby, ‘The Puritan Aesthete: Vernon Lee’, *The Singular Anomaly: Women Novelists of the Nineteenth Century* (London: London University Press, 1970), p. 238.

within the humanist philosophical and ethical stance that Lee maintained throughout her life. It also advances Lee's pacifist views during the First World War, primarily rooted in her deep belief in humanity and refusal of all types of cruelty, and which will be explored more in depth in the last section of this chapter. Lee's apparently uncosmopolitan remarks on Catholic Spain would find, then, a partial explanation in her firm opposition to violence and her latently pacifist ideology.

Yet Lee's open repulsion to Catholic Spain and especially to the Spanish madonnas would, paradoxically, prompt her to write 'The Virgin of the Seven Daggers', the most consciously Decadent of all her works: a sacrilegious tale in which Catholic and Moorish Spain are intertwined to explore notions of spiritual and moral perversity. Indeed, only the Moorish-Spanish Alhambra would escape Lee's harsh criticism during her journey in Spain: 'The Alhambra is *exactly* like the photographs & one's expectations [...] & lovely,' wrote Lee.<sup>90</sup> The prosperous past of Moorish Iberia and its bright Arab-Islamic architecture acted as Lee's only comfort during her forlorn one-month visit. In her *Commonplace Book*, Lee compared the architecture of the Alhambra to her beloved classical civilisations, delicate and moderate, as opposed to the pompous and overly elaborate Spanish Baroque: 'the Alhambra is a work of decay, a Pompeii of Moorish art'.<sup>91</sup>

Lee's letters home during her visit to Spain reveal that she was far more interested in reading about Spain's Moorish past than in melding with the 'fearfully dull' place and 'uninteresting' people of its present. She read incessantly about Moorish history and suggested subjects for her brother Eugene Lee-Hamilton's writing. 'I think I have a magnificent subject for a dramatic monologue or idyll for

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<sup>90</sup> Lee to Matilda Paget, Granada, 8 January 1889, Collection of Vernon Lee Materials, Colby College Special Collections, Waterville, Maine, USA.

<sup>91</sup> Lee, *Commonplace Book*, ns. 4, Collection of Vernon Lee Materials, Colby College Special Collections, Waterville, Maine, USA.

him [Eugene]; the story of one of the Christians put to death by the Moors', wrote Lee on 2 June 1889.<sup>92</sup> Three days later she would write again:

I have another ballad subject for him [Eugene]; in the tremendous Morisco revolt of 1569, a Moorish woman, Catalina de Arroyo, who had a son by a Xan [Christian], but who had remained strictly Moorish, saw her son, a priest, killed by the Moors; when she declared herself a Xan [Christian] & made them kill her in the church yard, singing Xan [Christian] hymns.<sup>93</sup>

Lee had actually borrowed the story from the book *La Alpujarra* (1874) by the renowned Spanish novelist and intimate friend of José Fernández Giménez, Pedro Antonio de Alarcón (1833–1891). The book, a traveller's account of the Andalusian region of the Alpujarra — a natural and historical region between the Sierra Nevada and the Mediterranean — was probably suggested to Lee by Fernández Giménez, whom Lee had previously asked for advice on Spanish books.<sup>94</sup> In a later letter, Lee went on to unveil the whole story to her mother and revealed her source:

‘Of Murtas’ says Alarcon in his book of the Alpujarra ‘was the famous Catalina de Arroyo, morisca on all sides, but mother of the priest Ocaña; the day he was killed by the Monfies together with the other Xans of the village, she called out for her death declaring that she was also Xan [...] The Alpujarras are on the south slopes of Sierra Nevada, which has eternal snow, Mulhacen.’<sup>95</sup>

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<sup>92</sup> Lee to Matilda Paget, Granada, 2 January 1889, Collection of Vernon Lee Materials, Colby College Special Collections, Waterville, Maine, USA.

<sup>93</sup> Lee to Matilda Paget, Granada, 5 January 1889, Collection of Vernon Lee Materials, Colby College Special Collections, Waterville, Maine, USA.

<sup>94</sup> ‘I am very grateful to you for the list of Spanish titles, which I won’t fail to research upon returning to town.’ My transcription and translation from the French: ‘Je vous suis très reconnaissante de la liste de titres espagnols, dont je ne manquerai pas de faire recherche à mon retour en ville.’ Lee to Fernández Giménez, Bagni di Lucca, 1 September 1880, Jose Fernández Giménez Archive, DC2, F39, Private Collection, Fort Collins, Colorado, USA.

<sup>95</sup> Lee to Matilda Paget, Granada, 8 January 1889, Collection of Vernon Lee Materials, Colby College Special Collections, Waterville, Maine, USA.



The extreme Spanish landscape and religious practices, the Spanish folktales of her friend Fernández Giménez, Alarcón's book, and the collision of Catholic and Moorish Spain, would eventually inspire her own writing. In the same letter, Lee wrote to her mother that she had 'an idea for a ghost story called "The Virgin of the Daggers"', which was 'about her [the Spanish Virgin of the Seven Daggers] and a Moorish Enchanted Princess.'<sup>96</sup> This is the germ of Lee's most republished tale in her lifetime and posthumously, 'The Virgin of the Seven Daggers'. In August 1889 Lee informed her mother that she had completed the Spanish story with the intention of publishing it 'for 40 pounds' in the short-lived *The New Review*.<sup>97</sup> But for some unknown reason, for which *The New Review* was 'profuse in apologies',<sup>98</sup> Lee ended up publishing the article 'The Craft of Words' in the magazine in 1894 'in exchange' for her tale.<sup>99</sup> In the meantime, Lee published her first collection of ghost stories, *Hauntings: Fantastic Stories* (1890), with four tales of art-induced obsessions that dwelt on the psychological. After this volume, Lee tried again to publish 'The Virgin of the Seven Daggers'. In August 1894 she wrote to her mother that she had recovered her 'long lost "Virgin of the 7 Daggers"' with the help of the publisher Heinemann.<sup>100</sup> She also sent a copy of the tale to William Blackwood:

I have just recovered, after five years of total disappearance & many adventures, a story of mine in two parts, called The Virgin of the Seven Daggers. It is a story of ghostly adventure, a working out of the least known of

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<sup>96</sup> Lee to Matilda Paget, Granada, 8 January 1889, Collection of Vernon Lee Materials, Colby College Special Collections, Waterville, Maine, USA.

<sup>97</sup> Lee to Matilda Paget, Ilkley, 30 August 1889, Collection of Vernon Lee Materials, Colby College Special Collections, Waterville, Maine, USA.

<sup>98</sup> Lee to Matilda Paget, Chelsea, 16 August 1894, Collection of Vernon Lee Materials, Colby College Special Collections, Waterville, Maine, USA: 'I have recovered my long lost "Virgin of the 7 Daggers". I have exchanged it for my lectures, "The New Review" is profuse in apologies.'

<sup>99</sup> Lee to Matilda Paget, Chelsea, 25 August 1894, Collection of Vernon Lee Materials, Colby College Special Collections, Waterville, Maine, USA: 'I have been very busy preparing my two lectures to give over to Grove in return for the Virgin of the 7 Daggers.'

<sup>100</sup> Lee to Matilda Paget, Chelsea, 16 August 1894, Collection of Vernon Lee Materials, Colby College Special Collections, Waterville, Maine, USA.

the Don Juan legends which I learned many years ago from a friend from Granada [José Fernández Giménez] — with enchanted princesses, wicked dons & the hero assisting at his own funeral. It strikes me as being in the tradition of your magazine, which has alone upheld, in these degenerate days, the good old ghost story.<sup>101</sup>

One year later, in 1895, Lee seems to have sent a copy of the tale to the literary agent A.P. Watt.<sup>102</sup> Neither Heinemann, nor Blackwood, nor any other publisher, however, took the story, and Lee had to wait two more years to see her story published for the first time, in French, in the Parisian daily newspaper *Journal des Débats*, one of the most influential organs of the French press in the nineteenth century. The tale was originally published in five parts during February 1896 under the title ‘La Madone Aux Sept Glaives’, translated, apparently, by Eugene Lee-Hamilton.<sup>103</sup> Its English version had to wait ten more years before it was published: ‘The Virgin of the Seven Daggers’ was finally released, for the first time in English, in 1909 in the second number of the new journal *The English Review*, founded by Ford Madox Ford (1873–1939) as a venue for some of the best writers of its day. When Madox Ford wrote in *The English Review* that the public of the periodical ‘will be aiding in giving expression to much contemporary thought which would otherwise only with difficulty find a place for expression’, one can think about the long journey made by Lee’s tale before it was first published.<sup>104</sup> Lee even referred to the tale once as that ‘everlasting 7 Daggers Madonna.’<sup>105</sup>

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<sup>101</sup> Vernon Lee to William Blackwood, Chelsea, 21 August 1894, quoted in Amanda Gagel, ‘Selected Letters of Vernon Lee (1856–1935)’ (unpublished doctoral thesis, Boston University, 2008), pp. 560–61.

<sup>102</sup> ‘Will you be very, very kind to send it [the tale] with the enclosed line to A.P Watt? Esq Hastings, Hanse, Norfolk Street, Strand?’ Vernon Lee to Kit Anstruther-Thomson, Palmerino, 16 August 1895, Collection of Vernon Lee Materials, Colby College Special Collections, Waterville, Maine, USA.

<sup>103</sup> Lee to Matilda Paget, Chelsea, 6 July 1895, Collection of Vernon Lee Materials, Colby College Special Collections, Waterville, Maine, USA: ‘I am so glad E. will be able to translate my Madonna’.

<sup>104</sup> Ford Madox Ford, ‘The English Review’, in *The English Review*, March 1909, p. xii.

<sup>105</sup> Lee to Kit Anstruther-Thomson, Palmerino, 16 August 1895, Collection of Vernon Lee Materials, Colby College Special Collections, Waterville, Maine, USA.

Her steadfast attitude towards the publication of the tale, however, suggests how keen she was to see the story in print. The reasons behind so many publishing rejections remain unknown, but one could speculate that the extreme sensuousness and disturbing effect of the tale may not have found favour among publishers, even in a booming marketplace for Gothic fiction. After all, as Vineta Colby writes, nowhere is ‘the darker side’ of Lee’s sensibility more apparent than in this story set in Spain.<sup>106</sup> The tale was finally published in book form in 1927 in the volume *For Maurice: Five Unlikely Stories*, with a detailed preface by Lee.

The differences between the three versions of the tale are mostly minor, and some are merely typographical. Some of the changes, however, are telling. Both English versions bear the subtitle ‘A Moorish Ghost Story of the Seventeenth Century’ which does not appear in the French, thus setting up a specific context for the story. The French version does not include a dedication, while both English versions are dedicated to José Fernández Giménez ‘in remembrance of the Spanish legends he was wont to tell me,’ which not only confirms the friendship between the Spanish art critic and Lee, but also gives credit to Spanish popular culture, clearly establishing a Spanish setting for the tale from the start. The English versions, published later, include even more allusions to specific characters of Spanish history and literature, such as the ‘Philips’ and ‘Charles the Melancholy’, all of which are related to the decay of the Spanish empire.<sup>107</sup>

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<sup>106</sup> Colby, *Vernon Lee*, p. 241.

<sup>107</sup> The Philips refer to the kings of the Habsburg dynasty named Philip that ruled Spain over the sixteenth and seventeenth century: Philip II (1527–1598), Philip III (1598–1621) and Philip IV (1605–1665). Charles the Melancholy refers to Charles II (1661–1700), the last Habsburg ruler of Spain. He was noted for his extensive physical, intellectual, and emotional disabilities — along with his consequent ineffectual rule. Under the first Habsburgs Spain dominated Europe politically and militarily, but experienced a gradual decline of influence in the second half of the seventeenth century under the later Habsburg kings.

In the story, Lee presents seventeenth-century Catholic and heroic Spain confronting its Moorish past. The tale, set in Granada, intertwines fictional and real characters and places to create a cruel yet exotic and seductive Spain: a Spain of extremes, of excess. It tells the story of a brutal Don Juan who has made a pact with the Virgin of the Seven Daggers, also called Our Lady of Sorrows. He promises to proclaim forever her supreme beauty and asks that in return she save him from damnation. Emboldened by the deal and driven by insatiable greed, he embarks on one final necromantic and obscure escapade to an enchanted palace beneath the Alhambra, where he seeks to attain a hidden treasure and a long-dead Moorish princess. After successfully bringing the princess back to life, she accepts his love provided that he disavows his loyalty to the Virgin. When he refuses to do so, he is beheaded by the princess's African eunuch, and his disembodied spirit roams the streets of Granada unaware of his own death until he is confronted with his own funeral. In spite of his multiple sins, he flies to heaven in full sight of the Virgin of the Seven Daggers, to whom he has unfalteringly shown his dedication.

In the 1927 preface to the final version of the tale, Lee looked back to the genesis of the story in 1889, revealing how the story was shaped in her mind 'round one of the legends told me many years before by that strange friend [Fernández Giménez] who used to boast, in his queer Andalusian French, that "Yé suis Arave [*sic*]." Meaning Moorish. Moorish!'<sup>108</sup> Lee recalled how 'there was an Infanta, so my friend had told me, buried with all her treasure and court somewhere beneath the deserted Moorish place.'<sup>109</sup> This legend is probably a mixture of two different

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<sup>108</sup> Lee, *For Maurice*, p. xx.

<sup>109</sup> Lee, *For Maurice*, pp. xx–xxi.

Andalusian popular tales which have been collected by Spanish writers throughout the centuries.

Serafin Estébanez Calderón (1799–1867)’s *Los tesoros de la Alhambra* (*The Treasures of the Alhambra*), first published in 1832 in the periodical *Cartas Españolas*, is probably the text on which Fernández Giménez based one of the stories he told Vernon Lee.<sup>110</sup> In the fantastic and mysterious *The Treasures of the Alhambra*, Estébanez Calderón — as Lee does in ‘The Virgin of the Seven Daggers’ — confronts Christian contemporary Spain with its Moorish past. Estébanez recounts how during the early years of the sixteenth century, Boabdil, the last king of Granada, ordered the concealment of all his treasures beneath a tower of the Alhambra before having to abandon the palace, leaving behind a soldier to guard his wealth. In nineteenth-century Granada, a young greedy student seeks to obtain the treasure by making a deal with the soldier. He fails and finally falls prey to a supernatural obsession with the Moorish treasure.

The other probable Spanish narrative in which Lee found inspiration for the tale is Ginés Pérez de Hita’s *Guerras civiles de Granada* (1595–1619), a rather well-known text in nineteenth-century England, which is probably one of the ‘Spanish books on the Moors’ that Lee took with her to Spain.<sup>111</sup> One of Pérez de Hita’s

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<sup>110</sup> Estébanez Calderón is considered one of the leading figures of the Spanish nineteenth-century *costumbrismo*, or Costumbrism, a movement of literary or pictorial interpretations of local everyday life, mannerisms, and customs, related both to artistic realism and to Romanticism. A celebrated Arab scholar, his novel *Cristianos y Moriscos* (1838), framed in the Romantic tradition, is a picture of Christians and Moors in Spain after the defeat of the Moors in the reign of Charles V. When he died in 1867, he was widely known as a leading man of letters. Estébanez Calderón and Fernández Giménez, Lee’s friend, were both active members of the private cultural institution *Athenæum of Madrid* in the 1860s, so it is more than probable that Fernández Giménez, himself also an Arab scholar, was acquainted with Estébanez Calderón’s work.

<sup>111</sup> In *Poetic Castles in Spain: British Romanticism and Figurations of Iberia* (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2000), Diego Saglia has convincingly argued how the fashion for Spanish-Oriental subjects in British texts and, more specifically for *alhambraism*, started during the 1810s and 1820s, as a parallel to Continental Romantic traditions. Saglia remarks that Spanish texts furnished most of the novelistic and historical materials for British Romantic representations of Moorish Granada and that Ginés Pérez de Hita’s text was the most influential of all; Lee to Matilda Paget, Granada, 8 January 1889, Collection of Vernon Lee Materials, Colby College Special Collections, Waterville, Maine, USA.

accounts, *Historia de los bandos de los Zegríes y los Abencerrajes*, tells the story of the affair between a Moorish queen and a nobleman of a rival family which take places at the foot of a cypress, which is believed to have given the name to ‘el Patio de los Cipreses’ [the courtyard of the cypresses] in the Alhambra. The encounter between Don Juan and the dead Moorish Infanta in Lee’s ‘The Virgin of the Seven Daggers’ takes places in the Tower of the Cypresses, suggesting a connection between the Spanish text and Lee’s tale.

Vineta Colby argues that Vernon Lee wrote her supernatural fiction under the direct influence of German and French Romantic supernatural literature, from Goethe’s evocation of the classical past in *Faust II* (1832), E.T.A Hoffmann’s *Der Sandmann* (1816), ‘to the drug-induced fantasies of Charles Baudelaire and the exoticism of Théophile Gautier’.<sup>112</sup> While this may be so, it is also clear that the Spanish legends and tales were at the heart of Lee’s novelistic imagination, from the popular folk tales that Fernández Giménez told her to José Zorrilla’s Romantic accounts such as *Don Juan Tenorio* (1844) and Pedro de Alarcón’s Moorish works. Indeed, one of the salient features of Spanish Romanticism (1830s–1850s) was its supernatural emphasis, including miracles, visions from beyond the grave, the diabolical, apparitions, and witchcraft.<sup>113</sup> Vernon Lee’s supernatural fiction owes much to the literary history of nineteenth-century Spain.

Lee’s Don Juan in ‘The Virgin of the Seven Daggers’ is, indeed, directly borrowed from Spanish literature. In the 1927 preface of the tale Lee explained that the Don Juan of her tale was ‘not at all Mozartian or Byronian’, but a legendary impersonation like that of Calderón de la Barca’s Ludovico Enio, that is, not

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<sup>112</sup> Colby, *Vernon Lee*, p. 225.

<sup>113</sup> For more on Spanish Romanticism and its preference for the supernatural see, for example, Ricardo Navas-Ruiz, *El Romanticismo español* (Salamanca: Anaya, 1970), and Jean-Louis Picoche, *Un romántico español* (Madrid: Gredos, 1978), p. 156.

irresistible nor guileless, nor Continental European nor English, but cruel Spanish.<sup>114</sup> Ludovico Enio, a character in Calderón's religious play, *El Purgatorio de San Patricio* [*The Purgatory of St Patrick*] (c. 1628), which Lee had read in 1880 'with great interest', is an impious and violent villain redeemed by his ardent faith, like Lee's hero.<sup>115</sup>

Spanish Baroque literature's rhetoric of excess is persistently replicated in the tale. Don Juan, for instance, is first described by Lee as 'Don Juan Gusman del Pulgar, Count of Miramor, Grandee of the first Class, Knight of Calatrava, and of the Golden Fleece, and Prince of the Holy Roman Empire.'<sup>116</sup> Again, when Don Juan speaks to the Virgin, his inflated speech is disproportionate:

I will assert always with my tongue and my sword, in the face of His Majesty and at the feet of my latest love, that although I have been beloved of all the fairest women in the world, high and low, both Spanish, Italian, German, French, Dutch, Flemish, Jewish, Saracen, and Gypsy, to the number of many hundreds, and by seven ladies, Dolores, Fatma, Catalina, Elvira, Violante, Azahar, and Sister Seraphita [...] I will maintain before all men and all the Gods of Olympus that no lady was ever so fair as our Lady of the Seven Daggers of Grenada [*sic*].<sup>117</sup>

Lee would also replicate many real, and overly adorned, Spanish places in her supernatural tale. The Church of Our Lady of the Seven Daggers is presumably inspired by both the late sixteenth-century Cathedral of Granada (fig. 3 and fig. 4) where there is a chapel dedicated to Our Lady of Sorrows, and the seventeenth-century *Basílica de Nuestra Señora de las Angustias*, or Our Lady of Sorrows, of Granada (fig. 5). Both temples represent what Lee described as 'a superb example of the pompous,

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<sup>114</sup> Lee, *For Maurice*, p. xix.

<sup>115</sup> Lee to Fernández Giménez, Bagni di Lucca, 1 September 1880, Jose Fernández Giménez Archive, DC2, F39, Private Collection, Fort Collins, Colorado, USA.

<sup>116</sup> Lee, *For Maurice*, p. 101.

<sup>117</sup> Lee, *For Maurice*, pp. 99–100.



Fig. 3 Jean Laurent, *Façade of the Cathedral, Granada*, c. 1875–1892, photograph, Detroit Institute of Arts (Detroit, Michigan, USA).





Fig. 4 Jean Laurent, *Interior of the Granada Cathedral*, 1881, photograph.





Fig. 5 Javier Guerra Hernando, *Basílica de Nuestra Señora de las Angustias* [*Our Lady of Sorrows Basilica in Granada*], photograph.

pedantic and contorted Spanish architecture of the reign of the later Philips', and the Basilica has a facade flanked by two tall towers, as does Lee's church's with its 'two balconied and staircased belfries.'<sup>118</sup> Lee's visit to the cathedral of Granada in January 1889 was minutely recorded in her *Commonplace Book*, and then reproduced in the essay 'In Praise of Old Houses', included in *Limbo and Other Essays* (1897).<sup>119</sup> It was the anniversary of the Conquest of Granada from the Moors, she wrote, and the organ of the cathedral

Possessed me completely raising one into a sort of beatitude, a kind of rapture [...] For a few moments thus, in that chapel before the tombs of the Catholic kings; [...] with the gold pomegranate flower of the badges, and the crimson tassels of the Moorish standards before my eyes; [...] — for a moment while the priests were chanting and the organs quavering, the life of to-day seemed to reel and vanish, and my mind to be swept along the dark and gleaming whirlpools of the past.<sup>120</sup>

This description unveils an intense experience, in which the Catholic present and the Moorish past of Spain collide. Lee would later include the episode in 'The Virgin of the Seven Daggers', which reveals the decisive impact that Lee's visit to Spain had on the sensuous, and Decadent, outcome of the tale: 'The place was filled with delicious fragrance of incense, and with sounds of exquisitely played lutes and viols, and of voices, among which he [Don Juan] distinctly recognized Syphax, His Majesty's chief soprano.'<sup>121</sup> The 'ineffable' fragrance and the 'exquisite' music carry a sense of mystery and voluptuousness, which speaks of a spiritual and bodily experience, rather than an intellectual one.

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<sup>118</sup> Lee, *For Maurice*, p. 95.

<sup>119</sup> Lee, *Commonplace Book*, ns. 4, Collection of Vernon Lee Materials, Colby College Special Collections, Waterville, Maine, USA.

<sup>120</sup> Vernon Lee, 'In Praise of Old Houses', in *Limbo and Other Essays* (London: Grant Richards, 1897), p. 35.

<sup>121</sup> Lee, *For Maurice*, p. 138.

Vernon Lee's figure of the Virgin of the Seven Daggers is also presumably inspired by three real-life representations of Spanish madonnas of Sorrows: The Virgin of Hope of Macarena of Seville (c. 1680) (fig. 6); Our Lady of Sorrows in the Cathedral of Granada (c. 1750) (fig. 7), and Our Lady of Sorrows of the Basilica of Sorrows in Granada (1565, retouched in 1718) (fig. 8). All of them have a 'sad and ceremonious smile' and are 'crowned with a great jewelled crown.'<sup>122</sup> When Lee writes 'Is she seated or standing? 'Tis impossible to decide', she is echoing the image of these virgins.<sup>123</sup> The image that most resembles Lee's tale is, nonetheless, Our Lady of the Macarena, the Virgin of Seville, whose face 'is made of wax, white with black glass eyes and a tiny coral mouth.'<sup>124</sup> She also holds 'a lace pocket-handkerchief', has 'veils of delicate lace falling from head to waist', and in her bodice were, in Lee's time, 'stuck seven gold-hilted knives' — in 1913, the seven daggers of the image were replaced by five little emeralds (fig. 9).<sup>125</sup>

The contradiction — detestation and inspiration — of Lee's reception of Spain accords with Vineta Colby's description of the writer: 'Paradoxically, she was at once a puritan preaching a strict morality and an aesthete revelling in the absolute moral detachment of pure art.'<sup>126</sup> Lee, Catherine Maxwell also claims, seems to have been inspired by what she claimed to loathe, and Spain was no exception. While as a critic she wished to reject morbidity and decay and embrace 'health', Maxwell notes, Lee's 'own strong creative impulses appear not to have allowed her the easy separation of material such a categorization would imply.'<sup>127</sup> A prominent example of this

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<sup>122</sup> Lee, *For Maurice*, p. 97–8.

<sup>123</sup> Lee, *For Maurice*, p. 97.

<sup>124</sup> Lee, *For Maurice*, p. 97.

<sup>125</sup> Lee, *For Maurice*, p. 97–8.

<sup>126</sup> Colby, 'The Puritan Aesthete: Vernon Lee', p. 236.

<sup>127</sup> Catherine Maxwell, 'Vernon Lee and Eugene Lee-Hamilton', in *Vernon Lee: Decadence, Ethics, Aesthetics*, ed. by Catherine Maxwell and Patricia Pulham (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006), p. 38.





Fig. 6 Manuel Francisco Álvarez Ruiz (photographer), unknown sculptor, *Rostro de la Esperanza Macarena* [Detail, *Virgin of the Hope of Macarena in Seville*], photograph.





Fig. 7 Stuart Roberts (photographer), Agustín Vera Moreno (sculptor), *Statue of 'Nuestra Señora de las Angustias' in the Cathedral of Granada*, photograph.



Fig. 8 José Manuel Ferro Ríos (photographer), Gaspar Becerra and Duque Cornejo (sculptors), *Statue of 'Nuestra Señora de las Angustias', the holy patron of the city, in the same named Basilica, Granada*, photograph.





Fig. 9 José Luiz Bernardes Ribeiro (photographer), unknown sculptor, *Esperanza Macarena* [*Virgin of the Hope of Macarena in Seville*], photograph.



ambivalence on Lee's part is her only novel, *Miss Brown* (1884). With the novel, Lee wished to attack the literary and artistic cult of Decadence, but instead found herself 'arraigned for writing a book which many found morally repulsive'.<sup>128</sup>

Spanish 'doll-madonnas' are, indeed, central to the tension between Lee's notion of the real and the supernatural, two extremes between which Lee was repeatedly charting a course in Spain. Colby comments that when Lee writes of the 'culture ghost' of her stories she is referring to 'some manifestation of art — painting, sculpture, music — that gives each story its unique flavour'.<sup>129</sup> 'The Virgin of the Seven Daggers' also explores art-induced obsessions, in relation to the Catholic Marian devotion of figures of virgins. The figure of the Virgin was generally, for Lee, a depiction of aesthetic values: 'If I have anywhere in my soul a secret shrine, it is to Our Lady [...] For is she not the divine Mother of Gods as well as God [...] in whom the sad and ugly things of our bodily origin and nourishment are transfigured into the grace of the immortal spirit?'.<sup>130</sup> Yet Spanish madonnas did not fit within this description:

And just in proportion to that natural devotion of mine to the Beloved Lady and Mother, Italian or High Dutch, who opens her scanty drapery to suckle a baby divinity, just in proportion did that aversion concentrate on those doll-madonnas in Spanish churches, all pomp and whalebone and sorrow and tears wept into Mechlin lace.<sup>131</sup>

The representations of the Virgin Mary in Italy, to which Lee was accustomed, were less pompous in their clothing and less grievous; what Lee perceived as restrained

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<sup>128</sup> Catherine Maxwell and Patricia Pulham, 'Introduction', in *Vernon Lee: Decadence, Ethics, Aesthetics*, ed. by Catherine Maxwell and Patricia Pulham (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006), p. 9.

<sup>129</sup> Colby, *Vernon Lee*, p. 242.

<sup>130</sup> Lee, *For Maurice*, pp. xvii–xviii.

<sup>131</sup> Lee, *For Maurice*, p. xix.

Catholic Italy was more acceptable than the morbid Catholic Spain of her imagination. Patricia Pulham has argued that, for Lee, ‘these wax doll-madonnas, with their uncanny verisimilitude to the female body, are perhaps too disturbing as objects of adoration and reverence outside the realms of fantasy.’<sup>132</sup> Only through fantasy and literary production, then, was Lee able to accept the existence of such a disturbing icon.

Lee linked her Virgin of the Seven Daggers to yet another cultural reference that also informed her imagination while causing deep aesthetic, and moral, anxiety: Charles Baudelaire. In the preface to the last version of ‘The Virgin of the Seven Daggers’ (1927) Lee used as an epigraph the subtitle of Baudelaire’s poem ‘À une Madone’ [‘To a Madonna’] ‘Ex-voto dans le Goût Espagnol’, or ‘votive offering in the Spanish style.’ In the poem, included in *Les Fleurs du Mal* (1857), arguably the foundational text of French Decadence, Baudelaire subjects the Virgin Mary to a combination of extremes: the sumptuous and the barbarian. Describing her first in the imagery of the Immaculate Virgin, the poet then plants the deadly sins like daggers in her heart. Lee seems to have chosen then this imagery of the Virgin to portray the unrestrained cruelty of Spanish Catholicism. In ‘À une Madone’, Baudelaire writes:

And mixing love with pagan cruelty  
Full of dark, remorseful joy, I’ll take  
The seven deadly sins, and of them make  
Seven bright Daggers; with a juggler’s lore<sup>133</sup>

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<sup>132</sup> Patricia Pulham, *Art and the Transitional Object*, p. 92.

<sup>133</sup> Charles Baudelaire, *The Flowers of Evil*, trans. by James McGowan (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), p. 121: ‘Et pour mêler l’amour avec la barbarie, Volupté noire! des sept Péchés capitaux, Bourreau plein de remords, je ferai sept Couteaux Bien affilés, et comme un jongleur insensible’.

Baudelaire is here portraying the disturbing, contradictory cruelty — ‘full of dark, remorseful joy’ — that Lee sees in Spanish Catholic rituals. For Lee, Baudelaire illustrates — like the aforementioned Maurice Barrès — the French exaltation of the darker side of Spanish culture, in this case of Catholicism.

‘The Virgin of the Seven Daggers’ is Lee’s unique response to the Decadent male obsession with Marian imagery, with Spanish rituals at its heart.<sup>134</sup> The Decadent Madonna, like the Decadent woman, is a female figure that is, at the same time, an ideal of womanhood and beauty, and a perverse *femme fatale*. Decadents transfigured the beloved into a Madonna, but they saw this ideal beloved and the *femme fatale* as one being. The representation of the Virgin that the Decadents prefer, then, is not the peaceful, aesthetic view of the Pre-Raphaelites, but the Spanish Lady of Sorrows, a ‘sad and anguished Madonna by herself, weeping, wringing hands, the seven daggers stuck on or near them’, wax doll-madonnas, with ‘an uncanny verisimilitude to the female body’.<sup>135</sup>

With her tale, Lee seems to be making a Decadent parody, or critique, of all the male interpretations of the Lady of Sorrows. As she did with her novel, *Miss Brown*, while trying to mock and denounce the ‘unhealthy’ ways of Decadence, she created a ‘morbid’, blasphemous and Decadent tale herself. Crucially, the primary target of her mockery is that of the male figure, Don Juan, that she describes as ‘a cavalier of very great birth, fortune, magnificence, and wickedness’, and whose prayer is but a parody of the Litany of the Virgin Mary, ‘O great Madonna, O Snow Peak untrodden of the Sierras, O Sea unnavigated of the tropics, O Gold Ore unhandled by

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<sup>134</sup> As well as Charles Baudelaire’s ‘À une Madone’ (*Les Fleurs du Mal*, 1857), see, for example, Algernon Charles Swinburne’s ‘Dolores’ (*Poems and Ballads*, 1866) and Arthur Symonds’ ‘To Our Lady of the Seven Sorrows’ (*Images of Good and Evil*, 1899).

<sup>135</sup> Lee, *Commonplace Book*, ns. 4, Collection of Vernon Lee Materials, Colby College Special Collections, Waterville, Maine, USA; Pulham, *Art and the Transitional Object*, p. 92.

the Spaniard, O New Minted Doubloon unpocketed by the Jew'.<sup>136</sup> As mentioned above, when Don Juan speaks to the Virgin, his speech is excessive:

Consider that I have committed every crime without faltering, both murder, perjury, blasphemy, and sacrilege, yet have I always respected thy name, nor suffered any man to give greater praise to other Madonnas, neither her of Good Counsel, nor her of Swift Help, nor our Lady of Mount Carmel, nor our Lady of St. Luke of Bologna in Italy, nor our Lady of the Slipper of Famagosta in Cyprus, nor our Lady of the Pillar of Saragossa, great Madonnas every one, and revered throughout the world for their powers, and by most men preferred to thee; yet has thy servant, Juan Gusman del Pulgar, ever asserted, with words and blows, their infinite inferiority to thyself. Give me, therefore, O Great Madonna of the Seven Daggers, I pray thee, the promise that thou wilt save me ever from the clutches of Satan, as thou has wrested me ever on earth from the King's Alguazils and the Holy Officer's delators, and let me never burn in eternal fire in punishment of my sins. [...] Grant me this boon, O Burning Water and Cooling Fire, O Sun that shineth at midnight, and Galaxy that resplendeth at moon — grant me this boon, and [...] I will maintain before all men and all the Gods of Olympus that no lady was ever so fair as our Lady of the Seven Daggers of Grenada [*sic*].<sup>137</sup>

After all this hyperbolic mockery, in the end, Vernon Lee killed Don Juan. He was finally 'disembodied [...] He was a ghost. He was dead.'<sup>138</sup> As if inverting the bodily descriptions of the Lady of Sorrows by the Decadent male poets, Lee wrote that Don Juan felt that 'he had no longer any knees, nor indeed any back, any arms, or limbs or any kind, and he dared not ask himself whether he was still in possession of a head.'<sup>139</sup> Even more tellingly, the tale ends with the Virgin fixing her eyes on him. She is no longer the object of the male gaze, but becomes an active observer:

And, as Don Juan floated upwards through the cupola of the church, his heart suddenly filled with a consciousness of extraordinary virtue; the gold transparency at the top of the dome expanded; its rays grew redder and more golden, and there burst from it at last a golden moon crescent, on which stood,

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<sup>136</sup> Lee, *For Maurice*, p. 98.

<sup>137</sup> Lee, *For Maurice*, pp. 98–100.

<sup>138</sup> Lee, *For Maurice*, p. 137.

<sup>139</sup> Lee, *For Maurice*, p. 137.

in her farthingale of puce and her stomacher of seed-pearl, her big black eyes fixed mildly upon him, the Virgin of the Seven Daggers.<sup>140</sup>

Regardless of the mocking tone of the tale, the Catholic symbolism and imagery that riddle the story also bestow a sombre and disturbing effect. Lee's paradoxical, and even parodic, reception of Spanish Catholicism — detestation and attraction — corresponds with the *fin-de-siècle*'s complex relation to Catholicism, which will be further explored in the fourth chapter of this thesis. As Ellis Hanson points out, late-nineteenth-century Decadents 'found in the Church a peculiar language for artistic and sexual expression [...] Catholicism was the odd disruption, the hysterical symptom, the mystical effusion, the medieval spectacle, the last hope for paganism, in an age of Victorian Puritanism, Enlightenment rationalism, and bourgeois materialism.'<sup>141</sup> Both Decadence and Catholicism, Hanson points out, were elaborate paradoxes, and the space offered by Catholic ritual allowed the contradictions of Decadence to exist unresolved. Mirroring the aesthetics of extremes that Decadents found in Spain, the Catholic Church appears as 'at once modern and yet medieval, ascetic and yet sumptuous, spiritual and yet sensual, chaste and yet erotic, homophobic and yet homoerotic, suspicious of aestheticism and yet an elaborate work of art.'<sup>142</sup>

It was also, and paradoxically, in her aversion to Spanish Catholicism that Lee found the perfect Decadent framework to create 'The Virgin of the Seven Daggers'. The constant references to 'blood', 'punishment' and 'wounds' which serve to create the obscurely fantastic atmosphere of the tale can only be traced to the history and culture of Spanish devotion. Lee described, for example, the 'bloody wounds', the 'blood-coloured damask', and the snows of the Mulhacen mountain in Spain as being

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<sup>140</sup> Lee, *For Maurice*, pp. 138–39.

<sup>141</sup> Ellis Hanson, *Decadence and Catholicism* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1997), p. 26.

<sup>142</sup> Hanson, p. 7.

‘blood-red’ under the sun.<sup>143</sup> Catholic Spain offered Lee, then, a grim, exaggerated artificiality to explore notions of cruelty and excess.

Moorish Spain, in contrast, allowed Lee to recreate a Decadent world of senses, dreams, mysticism and otherworldliness. In a scene of dazzlingly sensuous imagery, the spirit of the long-dead Moorish princess, buried beneath the Alhambra, is summoned up:

The breast of the princess heaved deeply; her lips opened with a little sigh, and she languidly raised her long-fringed lips [...] Her breast was covered with rows and rows of the largest pearls, a perfect network reaching from her slender throat to her waist [...] Her face was oval, with the silver pallor of the young moon; her mouth, most subtly carmined, looked like a pomegranate flower among tuberoses, for her cheeks were painted white, and the orbits of her great long-fringed eyes were stained violet. In the middle of each cheek, however, was a delicate spot of pink, in which an exquisite art had painted a small pattern of pyramid shape.<sup>144</sup>

Lee’s distinction between the moderate, yet sensuous, Moorish past of Spain, and the excessive and perverse Catholic present in ‘The Virgin of the Seven Daggers’ is fundamental for an understanding of the other Spanish texts she wrote during the 1890s and early 1900s, as well as of her general creative trajectory. For Lee, Catholic Spain is cruel, hyperbolic and barbarous whilst Moorish Spain appears full of peacefulness, moderation and sensual grace. This cultural disjunction between Spanish ‘modern Christendom’ and ‘vanished Islam’ is constantly acknowledged in ‘The Virgin of the Seven Daggers’: Don Juan is described as ‘wicked’, ‘a demon’, ‘a sinner’ and ‘impatient.’ He symbolises the cruel, barbaric Spaniard. The ‘strange’, ‘sad’ and ‘mysterious’ Madonna is an example of the morbid spirit of Spanish Catholicism, whilst the Moorish Infanta, ‘more exquisite than Venus, more noble than

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<sup>143</sup> Lee, *For Maurice*, pp. 97–106.

<sup>144</sup> Lee, *For Maurice*, pp. 123–24.

Juno, and infinitely more agreeable than Minerva', embodies what Lee perceives as Spain's brilliant peaceful Oriental past.<sup>145</sup> The Catholic 'Church of the Seven Daggers' is also described as having 'monstrous heads' with a roof that 'shines barbarically' and 'jagged lines everywhere as of spikes for exhibiting the heads of traitors; dizzy ledges as of mountain precipices for dashing to bits Morisco rebels.'<sup>146</sup>

Sondeep Kandola has suggested that, rather than representing an elegant melding of two cultures, Lee's description of the church 'reveals the struggle between Africa and Europe for cultural and political dominance of the region and its history as one of violent conflict between two civilizations.'<sup>147</sup> This remark, framed within the context of a pre-First World War Imperial Europe, takes on a crucial relevance.

By the turn of the twentieth century, fears had begun to grow in Britain that it would no longer be able to defend the metropole and the entirety of the empire while at the same time maintaining the policy of 'splendid isolation'. In accordance with the more tumultuous pre-war period, Lee's aesthetic writing from the late 1890s onwards became increasingly ethical, which she memorably articulated in *Renaissance Fancies and Studies* (1895) pledging herself to 'art, not for art's sake, but art for the sake of life — art as one of the harmonious functions of existence.'<sup>148</sup> Ill health and a reorientation of her interests during the period of her recovery led her to focus on the problems of the present, and on a more restrictedly psychological view. The duality of Catholic versus Moorish Spain continued, in this context, to help Lee articulate her current concerns.

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<sup>145</sup> Lee, *For Maurice*, p. 106.

<sup>146</sup> Lee, *For Maurice*, pp. 95–96.

<sup>147</sup> Kandola, p. 57.

<sup>148</sup> Vernon Lee, *Renaissance Fancies and Studies: A Sequel to Euphorion* (London: Smith, Elder, 1895), p. 259.

### **Pacifist Harmony: ‘The sadness of the Moors’ destruction’**

In the winter of 1899, on the very eve of the twentieth century, Vernon Lee completed her only play, *Ariadne in Mantua*. In this drama written in prose, published in 1903, we find the perfect blending of Lee’s preferred civilisations, those ones to which she never ceased to come back for shelter: Renaissance Italy, Ancient Greece, and Moorish Spain. The play tells the story of a hopeless love and is a celebration of Lee’s love for the music and art of the late Renaissance and a private lamentation for the vanishing of the *genius loci*. The plot of the play is constructed in reminiscence of the old Greek legend of Ariadne, daughter of Minos, who liberated her lover Theseus from the labyrinth and was deserted by him when their ship touched at the island of Naxos. Characters and setting are changed: the action takes place in late sixteenth-century Italy, Theseus becomes Ferdinand, Duke of Mantua, and Ariadne becomes Magdalen, disguised as Diego, ‘a Spaniard of Moorish descent’.<sup>149</sup>

The male name Ferdinand, of Germanic origin, was adopted in Romance languages from its use in the Visigothic Kingdom and became highly popular in German-speaking Europe from the sixteenth century, with Habsburg rule over Spain. The name is best known for the King of Spain Ferdinand II, the Catholic (1452–1516). In 1504, after a war with France, he also became King of Naples, reuniting Naples with Sicily permanently and for the first time since 1458. Alongside his wife Isabella I, he fought the final war with the Emirate of Granada which expunged the last Islamic state on Spanish soil. In the Commonplace Book Lee kept while visiting Spain, she made several references to the Catholic kings of Spain, and included them also in ‘The Virgin of the Seven Daggers’. In *Ariadne in Mantua*, then, Lee continued the Spanish

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<sup>149</sup> Vernon Lee, *Ariadne in Mantua: A Romance in Five Acts* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1903), p. 15.



Catholic-Moorish confrontation initiated in ‘The Virgin of the Seven Daggers’, by setting in opposition Ferdinand, ‘the Catholic’, and Diego, ‘the Moorish’.

In the preface to the play, Lee explained that the drama related the ‘contending forces of history and life: Impulse and Discipline, creating and keeping; love such as Diego’s, blind, selfish, magnanimous; and detachment, noble, a little bloodless and cruel, like that of the Duke of Mantua.’<sup>150</sup> The duality of forces in nature and history is once more represented by Lee’s beloved *genius loci*. In allusion to Western civilisation Lee wrote that

These well-born people of Mantua, privileged beings wanting little because they have much, and able therefore to spend themselves in quite harmonious effort, must necessarily get the better of the poor gutter-born creature without whom, after all, one of them would have been dead and the others would have had no opening in life. Poor Diego acts magnanimously, being cornered; but he (or she) has not the delicacy, the dignity to melt into thin air [...] and leave them to their untroubled conscience. He must needs assert himself, violently wrench at their heart-strings, give them a final stab, hand them over to endless remorse; [...] Certainly neither the Duke, nor the Duchess Dowager, nor Hippolyta would have done this. But, on the other hand, they could calmly, coldly, kindly accept the self-sacrifice culminating in that suicide: well-bred people, faithful to their standards and forcing others, however unwilling, into their own conformity. Of course without them the world would be a den of thieves, a wilderness of wolves; for they are, — if I may call them by their less personal names, — Tradition, Discipline, Civilization.<sup>151</sup>

Through her *genius loci*, then, Lee presents here the violent conflict between the Orient and the West, which she had outlined in ‘The Virgin of the Seven Daggers’. Italy is used as an ideal setting for the play, but Catholic and Moorish Spain serve as the real inspiration for the plot.

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<sup>150</sup> Lee, *Ariadne in Mantua*, p. x.

<sup>151</sup> Lee, *Ariadne in Mantua*, pp. viii–ix.

In a similar vein, Lee published in *The Enchanted Woods* (1905) ‘The Generalife’, an essay on the fourteenth-century Moorish-Spanish gardens next to the Alhambra, in Granada, that she had visited eight years before. In this text Lee explicated her preference for Moorish over Catholic Spain: ‘The very little I have seen of Spain is Moorish; but Moorish with the sadness of the Moors’ destruction; Africa, one might say, revenging herself on that cruel Spain and rendering it so oddly sterile of all things good.’<sup>152</sup> For Lee the eternal dialectic of good versus evil was contained in the dualities of Spain: ‘the desolation [...] seems to belong to the Spaniards, rightful owners, aborigines of this unkind-looking country; while the few spots of sweetness and grace are made by the Moors — left by them in an alien land when they were banished.’<sup>153</sup>

In the gardens of the Generalife Lee found ‘the chasm between past and present, modern Christendom and that vanished Islam’.<sup>154</sup> Spain was, for Lee, an example of the struggle between the East and the West in a historical moment when the delineation between Occident and Orient was an important component of British Imperial discourse and that of pre-war Europe. The Saidian Orientalist frame is only partially applicable to Lee’s actual experience of Spain, and, while providing one model for understanding her complex reactions to the country, does not entirely account for their profound ambivalence. Rather, her preference for Moorish over Catholic Spain unveils a more complex position. Moorish Spain, albeit idolised, fitted within the humanist philosophical and ethical stance that Lee maintained throughout her life.

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<sup>152</sup> Lee, *The Enchanted Woods*, p. 217.

<sup>153</sup> Lee, *The Enchanted Woods*, p. 219.

<sup>154</sup> Lee, *The Enchanted Woods*, p. 221.

Her leaning towards this particular aspect of Spanish history advanced, indeed, her pacifist views during the First World War, primarily rooted in her deep belief in humanity and refusal of all types of cruelty. Lee opposed all wars, regardless of the countries involved. At the beginning of the Italo-Turkish War in 1911 Lee stated her pacifist views openly, and her Italian friends shunned her; in 1912 she criticised British campaigns in Africa such as those in the Sudan (1896–98) and against the Boers (1880–81 and 1899–1902), and at the verge of the First World War she regularly published articles warning against war and stressing Britain's obligation to prevent it.<sup>155</sup>

In *Enchanted Woods* and in all the books on travel in which Spanish culture and places are mentioned, Lee chose to elaborate on the Moorish past of Spain over its Catholic present: 'Spanish Spain with bullfights and cigarettes, Seville of Don Juan and Figaro, has nothing to say to these Moorish gardens [the Generalife]; has closed them in, or rather closed *them out of herself*, into peacefulness and gentle decay'.<sup>156</sup> Lee thus envisaged two opposites perennially held in tension in Spain: Catholic cruelty and Moorish peacefulness. Moorish Spain becomes, then, a recurrent theme to represent all that was good in the world: 'One feels as much about every little fruitful gap in those endless miles of stony hill and plateau, oases of orange trees and sugar canes, with the great wells rising among them; it felt also even of the market gardens round Malaga and Seville, where we bought lemons and winter roses: the Moors must have made them.'<sup>157</sup> The Alhambra and its gardens offered all kind of sensuous pleasures:

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<sup>155</sup> For more information on Lee's pacifist views see, for example, Colby (2003), Grace Brockington, 'Performing Pacifism: The Battle between Artist and Author in *The Ballet of the Nations*' in *Vernon Lee: Decadence, Ethics, Aesthetics*, ed. by Catherine Maxwell and Patricia Pulham (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006), and Kandola (2010).

<sup>156</sup> Lee, *The Enchanted Woods*, p. 220.

<sup>157</sup> Lee, *The Enchanted Woods*, p. 219.

A wonderfully peaceful place [...] a *hortus inclusus* in the best sense, where the winter sun lies in the myrtle hedges and on the blue-and-green tiled paths strewn with fragrant, dry fig-leaves. [...] The place was full of the scent, sweet but medicinal, of that winter blossom which covers its bare twigs with pale yellow, dried-up looking stars; and from the gardener's house there rose into the damp warm air that subtler perfume still of burning olive branches or vine stumps.<sup>158</sup>

The trope of the 'enclosed garden', both real and imagined, serves Lee to reflect on the existence of bounded spaces that can provide both bodily sensations and shelter for the mind — 'sweet but medicinal'. All that was good in Spain belonged to the 'enclosed' period of the Moorish rule, while the present of the country was 'openly' cruel, rooted in the Baroque Catholic period.

In 1914 in the *Tower of Mirrors* Lee would close her twenty-five-year discourse on Spanish duality — Moorish and Catholic — writing about:

The South, I then understood, but not the Italian South, which is my reality. Rather, the beginning of an unknown and imaginary Spain that I shall, perhaps, never see, but always henceforward dream of: a South with the mad swagger of that cathedral fortress, and its odd, savage look of an unavenged past, with the fierce colour of the orange-brick and the tawny river beneath the great red span of its bridges: a tragic South flaring at sunset as if to tell of some great burning of heretics.<sup>159</sup>

Lee returns here to the same discourse of excess she had used when describing Spain in her 1888 visit. For the first time, she recognises that she is writing about an 'unknown' and 'imaginary' Spain, whose perverse allure she cannot escape. She even delights in writing about the 'great burning of heretics', and in the use of atavistic adjectives, such as 'savage' and 'fierce'. The excess of Catholic Spain is for Lee both

<sup>158</sup> Lee, *The Enchanted Woods*, pp. 219–23.

<sup>159</sup> Vernon Lee, *The Tower of the Mirrors and Other Essays on the Spirit of Places* (London: John Lane, The Bodley Head, 1914), p. 54.

perverse, and irresistible. Dreaming of that ‘tragic’ Spain represents almost an act of transgression for Lee. When she published in 1927 her last collection of short stories *For Maurice*, she selected her Spanish Decadent tale, ‘The Virgin of the Seven Daggers’, together with another four stories out of the more than twenty that she had published during her career. The inclusion of the Spanish tale, with a long, detailed preface, confirms Lee’s continued, life-long fascination with the extreme dualities of this real and imagined space.

## **Conclusion**

From her first works on aesthetics in the early 1880s, to her later stories of the supernatural and travel essays in the 1890s and 1900s, Spanish paradoxes were a constant point of reference in Lee’s writing. Her close friendship with the Spanish diplomat and art critic José Fernández Giménez offered an opportunity to explore the principal concerns of the aesthetic doctrine of the 1880s, which regarded beauty as an end in itself. Her Spanish friend represented a perfect blend of the imaginative and the intellectual that formed Lee’s character at the time, and acted as a mentor for a young Lee eager to find a method to psychologically measure aesthetic experience and to incorporate psychological approaches to her supernatural fiction. This chapter has demonstrated how the direct and ‘strong’ influence that this Spanish aesthete exerted on Lee’s early writings on aesthetics and the supernatural is, indeed, fundamental to understanding both Lee’s sense of self and her later work.

Lee and Fernández Giménez developed a cosmopolitan friendship of which his Spanishness was, nonetheless, an essential element. Lee identified so much with Fernández Giménez that he was no longer regarded as an ‘other’, but as Lee’s ‘second’

self. Yet the Spanishness of Fernández Giménez — his Spanish manners, customs, and imaginary legends, and even his ‘lopsided and unaccountable’ nature — also played an instrumental role in Lee’s writing.

Later, Lee’s one-month visit to the country would prompt the writing of ‘The Virgin of the Seven Daggers’, the most consciously Decadent of all her works, a tale of Spanish excess and dualities. Lee found in late nineteenth-century Spain a country in gloom, a dark reflection of its former, golden imperial grandeur — splendour which, nonetheless, did not impress her. Spanish Baroque history and art were linked with cruelty and violence and were to be rejected. The unsettling Catholic practices of the country, in particular, were excessive and obscene. The ‘doll-madonnas in agony’ obsessively haunted Lee. On the other hand, Spain’s Moorish past acted as the countervailing extreme that conformed to Lee’s humanistic and classical ideals. Moorish Spain emerged as a harmonious refuge in her imagination. Lee’s travel essays on Spain during the 1900s, focused on Moorish history, also reflect her leaning towards a more ethical Aestheticism aligned with the reality of neglected social groups: the peacefulness of ‘vanished’ Moorish Spain represented a sanctuary in tumultuous socio-political times.

Spanish ‘ironical’ paradoxes, ‘all or nothing’, Catholic and Moorish, the sacred and the profane, East and West, penetrated Lee’s imagination, becoming a part of her creative process. She openly transgressed her aversion to the ‘hyperbole’ of Catholic Baroque Spain by recreating it in her supernatural fiction, both through subject matter and through style. This ‘transgressive’ experience allowed her to pass from a reasoned realm to an unordered and irrational one, freeing her literary work. Lee’s rejection of Spanish cruelty contrasts with the way in which other Decadent writers, such as Oscar Wilde, embraced this aspect of the country. By championing the Spanish melancholic

darkness and violent grotesque that Lee repudiated, Wilde confronted bourgeois moral and artistic values, as I move on to demonstrate in the following chapter of this thesis.

## 2.

**‘Ostentatious Ugliness’: Velázquez, Oscar Wilde and the Truth of Impression**

The Dwarf however, was really quite irresistible, and even at the Spanish Court, always noted for its cultivated passion for the horrible, so fantastic a little monster had never been seen.<sup>1</sup>

Oscar Wilde (1889)

When, in the present century, truth of impression became the governing ideal of art, Velasquez became the prophet of the new schools.<sup>2</sup>

R.A.M. Stevenson (1895)

**Introduction**

On 8 November 1885 Oscar Wilde (1854–1900) lamented in a letter to his friend, the critic and art historian Henry Currie Marillier (1865–1951): ‘Harry, why did you let me catch my train? I would have liked to have gone to the National Gallery with you, and looked at Velasquez’s pale evil King.’<sup>3</sup> The ‘pale evil King’ was Philip IV of Spain (1605–1665), the penultimate Hapsburg monarch under whose rule the decline of the Spanish Empire began. A fervent patron of the Spanish Golden Age, he is mostly remembered today as a prominent subject matter of the painter Diego Velázquez (1599–1660).<sup>4</sup> Wilde’s letter illustrates the two central elements of this

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<sup>1</sup> Wilde, ‘The Birthday of the Infanta’, p. 41.

<sup>2</sup> Stevenson, p. 105.

<sup>3</sup> Oscar Wilde, *The Complete Letters of Oscar Wilde*, ed. by Merlin Holland and Rupert Hart-Davis (London: Fourth Estate, 2000), p. 267.

<sup>4</sup> I am using the original Spanish spelling for Velázquez, but keeping the English spelling (Velasquez and Velazquez) as authors and scholars use it.



chapter. Firstly, it shows Wilde's admiration for Velázquez's ability to display corruption and darkness gilded by ornament and light. Secondly, the missive exemplifies a prevalent sentiment at the turn of the century among radical artists, writers, and critics which has been described as 'a cult of Velázquez'.<sup>5</sup>

Increasingly, critics are beginning to recognise the debt of late-nineteenth-century British painting to Velázquez.<sup>6</sup> These critics retrace how, in the last quarter of the nineteenth century, the new artistic schools associated Velázquez with modern painting. The Spanish master became, for the *fin de siècle*, both the ultimate realist and the first impressionist, and thus the harbinger of modernity in painting.<sup>7</sup> Velázquez's modern technique of fluid brushwork, use of variegated blacks, and his depiction of real people (ordinary and often deformed) exemplified a modern understanding of 'truth', interpreted by some as the 'truth of the real' and by others as the 'truth of impression.'<sup>8</sup> *Fin-de-siècle* British and Anglo-Americans painters associated with British Impressionism, particularly James McNeill Whistler (1834–1903), John Singer Sargent (1856–1925), and Walter Sickert (1860–1942), found in Velázquez the 'first Impressionist'.<sup>9</sup>

In a similar vein, *fin-de-siècle* writers and critics, including Oscar Wilde, Vernon Lee, Alice Meynell (1847–1922), Arthur Symons (1865–1945), Charles Ricketts (1866–1931) and Lucas Malet (1852–1931), among others, were also drawn

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<sup>5</sup> See, for example, Kenneth McConkey, 'The Theology of Painting — the Cult of Velázquez and British Art at the Turn of the Twentieth Century', *Visual Culture in Britain* 6:2 (2005), 189–205.

<sup>6</sup> See, for instance, Howarth (2007); Baker, Howarth, and Stirton (2009); Glendinning and Macartney (2010).

<sup>7</sup> Suzanne L. Stratton-Pruitt, 'Introduction: A Brief History of the Literature on Velázquez', in *The Cambridge Companion to Velázquez*, ed. by Suzanne L. Stratton-Pruitt (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), p. 6.

<sup>8</sup> The late nineteenth-century Realist movement would focus on the truth of the real, while the Impressionist movement would try to reveal the truth of impression.

<sup>9</sup> Walter Sickert, 'Topical Interviews: Mr Walter Sickert on Impressionist Art', in *Walter Sickert: The Complete Writings on Art*, ed. by Anna Gruetzner Robins (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), p. 56. The interview, conducted by the journalist Herbert Vivian, was originally published in *The Sun* on 8 September 1889.

to and inspired by Velázquez's work. But the importance of Velázquez in accounts of the literature of the period has been neglected by critics, with very few recent exceptions.<sup>10</sup> This chapter begins by exploring, therefore, the significance of Velázquez's painting among *fin-de-siècle* literary circles in Britain. I argue that, similar to the new schools of painting, Aesthete and Decadent writers appreciated Velázquez for his proto-impressionistic techniques; his unsettling of the idea of painting as the representation of an objective visual order; and for the ways such non-objective representational techniques could be reproduced in writing. In addition, they found in Velázquez's beautiful depictions of corrupted kings and deformed dwarfs an exemplary case of how to embrace Decadent abnormality and otherness in the arts.

In the second part of the chapter, I thus focus in particular on one of the most profoundly Decadent texts influenced by Velázquez's work, framed within this impressionistic understanding of the Spanish painter: Oscar Wilde's short story 'The Birthday of the Infanta' (1889, 1891). By rethinking Wilde's tale in relation to Velázquez and to the Spanish Baroque, this chapter highlights the significance of Spanish culture in Wilde's aesthetics and ethics. My contention is that Wilde used Velázquez's Spanish Baroque not only for over-ornamental, melodramatic effect but also — and centrally — for its subversive potential in the realms of aesthetics and ethics. This chapter argues that Wilde was drawn to Velázquez for his handling of painterly form as much as for his choice of subject-matter. He found in his paintings both a proto-impressionistic aesthetic and a visual rhetoric of deformity: the dark theatre of the court conveyed by a painterly craftsmanship that stretched the power of simple representation. Velázquez's proto-impressionistic technique allowed Wilde,

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<sup>10</sup> Hilary Fraser has alluded to Alice Meynell's reception of Velázquez in *Women Writing Art History in the Nineteenth Century* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014), and Catherine Delyfer has offered an in-depth reading of Lucas Malet and Velázquez in *Art and Womanhood in Fin-De-Siècle Writing* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2015).

indeed, to reflect on how subjectivity could be used to convey a ‘truthful’ sense of reality. Furthermore, the aesthetics of extremes of Velázquez’s Spanish Baroque — encapsulated in the excessive ornamentation and in the unsettling beauty–ugliness binary of the Spanish court and the Dwarf — permeates Wilde’s understanding of the repulsive and the deformed. As a result, the tale evokes the dark, melancholy spirit of Velázquez’s work and the Spanish Baroque.

Wilde’s interest in and engagement with the gloomiest side of the Spanish Baroque in ‘The Birthday of the Infanta’ is also framed within the notion of ‘Black Spain’: the identification of Spain with horror, gloom and darkness.<sup>11</sup> This perception, which had been part of the country’s visual imagination since Goya, became more prevalent in Spain’s late nineteenth-century culture after the country officially lost its last colonies. The notion of ‘Black Spain’ attracted and inspired British Decadent writers like Oscar Wilde via French Romantic, Decadent and Symbolist authors like Victor Hugo, Théophile Gautier, Charles Baudelaire and Paul Verlaine. These authors had already been using the idea of ‘Black Spain’ in their writing, but the term was first coined and explicitly outlined by the Spanish artist Darío de Regoyos (1857–1913) and the Belgian poet Emile Verhaeren (1855–1916) in the collaborative work *España Negra* [*Black Spain*]. The book, first published in 1899, was inspired by their travels across the Peninsula in 1888. As they travelled, poet and painter focused on the more outlandish features and the popular ancestral roots of the country: ruins, cemeteries, local bullfights, religious rites and processions arrested their interest.<sup>12</sup> As Havelock Ellis noted in 1908 in relation to that work, ‘no tourist in Spain has seen so vividly as

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<sup>11</sup> For more information on the notion of ‘Black Spain’ see Raquel González Escribano, *La España Negra* (Barcelona: Ediciones de La Central, 2010).

<sup>12</sup> Regoyos and Verhaeren were well known in British *fin-de-siècle* cultural circles: Regoyos was a good friend of the painter James McNeill Whistler and Verhaeren had been translated by Alma Strettell (1853–1939) in *The Yellow Book* and by Arthur Symons. Havelock Ellis also acknowledged, in *The Soul of Spain* (1908), that he had read *La España Negra*.

Verhaeren the sombre violence of the Spanish temperament, the insistent fascination of death'.<sup>13</sup> Wilde's 'The Birthday of the Infanta' anticipated the kind of vision of Spain Regoyos and Verhaeren would present: the beauty that lay behind the darkness of the country.

By the standards of Oscar Wilde criticism — a field of its own — it is surprising how relatively little critical analysis his short fiction has attracted. His fairy tales have largely been marginalised because of their apparently conservative morality, which seems at odds with the idea of Wilde as an amoral Decadent author. Recently, however, they have been the object of renewed attention, with the publication of individual essays and articles and two full-length studies (Killeen, 2007, and Markey, 2011), focused on resituating the collections in a complex nexus of theological, political, social, and national concerns.

Wilde's tale 'The Birthday of the Infanta' has been no exception. The few in-depth readings of the tale (Shewan, 1977; Duffy 2001; and Killeen, 2007) have been mostly focused on sexuality and religion, disregarding the significance of Velázquez and Spanish Baroque aesthetics in the tale — with the exception of Markey (2011), who acknowledges the importance of Velázquez, if not of the Spanish Baroque. Oscar Wilde never travelled to Spain — although he had plans to do so after leaving prison — and did not often mention the country or its culture in his writing, which partly explains the scholarly neglect regarding the role Spanish culture played in the formulation of Wilde's aesthetics and ethics.<sup>14</sup> Wilde's cosmopolitanism — an

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<sup>13</sup> Ellis, *The Soul of Spain* (1908), p. 26.

<sup>14</sup> On 12 April 1897 Wilde wrote to A.D. Hansell: 'Will you let my friend Mr More Adey know that Mr Frank Harris has kindly offered to take me with him to Spain for a month on my release, paying all my expenses, and arranging everything beforehand. I propose, for many reasons, to accept this offer. It will do me a great deal of good.' However, Frank Harris sent a verbal message through More Adey to say he was very sorry but could not do it, about which Wilde was very bitter. On 12 May 1897, he wrote to More Adey: 'Of course nothing would induce me to go on this driving-tour with him after that. I hardly suppose he expects it. Would you kindly write to him that you gave me his message and that I was a good deal distressed [...] This will end the driving-tour, and there is nothing in the message that

Irishman educated in England who embraced French culture — has generally been acknowledged (see, for example, Prewitt Brown, 1997, and Anderson, 2001), but none of these critics offer in-depth readings of Wilde's engagement with cultures other than France, and, occasionally, Ireland.<sup>15</sup> In order to truly assess Wilde's cosmopolitanism as articulated by his Decadent writings, it is necessary to re-evaluate the role of other geographies set aside by Franco-centric critics, and to relocate Wilde's writing within a variety of literary, cultural, and narrative traditions. In revealing the unnoticed and crucial significance of the Spanish Baroque in Wilde's tale and how it echoes through his later work, this chapter contributes, then, to a more nuanced understanding of Wilde's Decadent cosmopolitanism.

A few scholars have already underscored the importance of 'The Birthday of the Infanta' within Wilde's work. For Isobel Murray 'The Birthday of the Infanta' is the most important instance in Wilde, preceding *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (1890, 1891) and *Salomé* (1893), where beauty and cruelty — or heartlessness — are intertwined as an aesthetic category.<sup>16</sup> Regenia Gagnier has also highlighted that *A House of Pomegranates*, in which 'The Birthday of the Infanta' was included, advances many of the themes of *Dorian Gray*, while Rodney Shewan notes that the volume marks a transition between the themes and manner of *Poems* (1881) and *The Happy Prince* (1888) and the mature myth-making of *Dorian Gray* and *Salomé*.<sup>17</sup> Spanish culture, I argue, played a decisive role in this transition and in Wilde's association of beauty with cruelty. The Spanish Baroque backdrop of Velázquez's

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could hurt his feelings, so pray give it in my words. In fact Frank Harris has no feelings. It is the secret of his success.' *The Complete Letters of Oscar Wilde*, pp. 800–13.

<sup>15</sup> Katharina Herold is currently completing a doctoral thesis at Oxford University entitled 'The East in Decadent Literature in England and Germany, 1880–1920', which includes new research on Wilde.

<sup>16</sup> Isobel Murray, 'Introduction', in *The Complete Shorter Fiction of Oscar Wilde*, ed. by Isobel Murray (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1980), p. 15.

<sup>17</sup> Regenia Gagnier, *Idylls of the Marketplace: Oscar Wilde and the Victorian Public* (Aldershot: Scolar Press, 1987), p. 64; Rodney Shewan, *Oscar Wilde: Art and Egotism* (London: Macmillan, 1977), p. 51.

paintings enabled Wilde to explore Decadent aesthetics: over-ornamentation, sombre splendour, cruelty and deformity. Through Velázquez and the Spanish Baroque, Wilde attempted to explain the beauty and necessity of Decadence to a British readership critical of such a notion. This aesthetic reading suggests an ethical interpretation of the tale, as the story presents an unsettling relation between inner morality and outer beauty.

‘The Birthday of the Infanta’ focuses on the twelfth birthday celebrations of a Spanish princess, whose father still mourns the death of his adored wife, the child’s mother. Her birthday is the only time she is allowed to mingle with other children, and she much enjoys the many festivities arranged to mark it, especially the performance of a little Dwarf who has been brought from the forest to dance for her amusement. The Dwarf dances unaware that his audience is laughing at him. The Infanta throws a white rose to him, which he takes as a symbol of love. He finds his way inside the palace, and searches through rooms hoping to find the Infanta. Eventually, he comes across a mirror and sees his own image for the first time. Appalled by his ugliness, he then realises that the Infanta did not love him, but was laughing out of mockery, and he falls to the floor, wounded and sobbing. He crawls into the shadows where the Infanta and her entourage find him and, imagining it to be another act, laugh and applaud while his flailing grows weaker and weaker before he stops moving altogether. When the Infanta demands more entertainment, she is told that he will never dance again because he has died of a broken heart. ‘For the future let those who come to play with me have no hearts’, she cries, and runs out into the garden.<sup>18</sup>

The tale was first published in English and French on 30 March 1889 in *Paris Illustré*, a magazine that exemplifies the cosmopolitan writing community that Wilde

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<sup>18</sup> Wilde, ‘The Birthday of the Infanta’ (1891), p. 61.

represented.<sup>19</sup> Wilde's English version of the tale was originally entitled 'The Birthday of the Little Princess', and its title in French was 'L'Anniversaire de la naissance de la petite Princesse'. The tale was later included in *A House of Pomegranates* (1891), Wilde's second collection of fairy tales, but with a slightly different title: 'The Birthday of the Infanta'. The change from 'Little Princess' to 'Infanta' in the title establishes a specific context for the story. Rather than evoking the conventional, generic world of the fairy tale, the word 'Infanta' places the reader from the start in a Spanish context, thus revealing Wilde's recognition of this Spanish character as a key element of the story.<sup>20</sup>

*A House of Pomegranates* contained three other stories; 'The Young King', 'The Fisherman and his Soul', and 'The Star-Child'. Scholars agree that the stories in this collection are darker and more disturbing than Wilde's first volume of fairy tales, *The Happy Prince* (1888).<sup>21</sup> The fact that Wilde included his only tale inspired by Spain in his 'darkest' collection of stories is revealing. Wilde linked Velázquez's Spanish Baroque background with both splendour and cruelty — an 'ostentatious ugliness', as Wilde wrote in 'The Birthday of the Infanta'.<sup>22</sup> This dichotomy would ultimately permit Wilde to illustrate the complex aesthetic and ethical implications of art. Firstly, though, it is important to examine Wilde's choice of motif in the context of what Velázquez epitomised for the *fin de siècle*.

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<sup>19</sup> *Paris Illustré* was a weekly magazine, founded in 1883 and edited by the French historian Frédéric Masson (1847–1923), which included coloured illustrations, news, society gossip, fiction and articles on art. It published simultaneous French and English versions from 1888.

<sup>20</sup> The word 'infanta' was used in England since 1601 to describe the daughter of a Spanish or Portuguese monarch. *Oxford English Dictionary* [online], 'Infanta', <http://www.oed.com/view/Entry/95214?redirectedFrom=infanta> [accessed 20 May 2017].

<sup>21</sup> See, for example, Jarlath Killeen, *The Fairy Tales of Oscar Wilde* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2007); John Sloan, 'Introduction', in *The Complete Short Stories of Oscar Wilde*, ed. by John Sloan (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010); and Anne Markey, *Oscar Wilde's Fairy Tales. Origins and Contexts* (Sallins: Irish Academic Press, 2011).

<sup>22</sup> 'Some of the Violets themselves felt that the ugliness of the little Dwarf was almost ostentatious'. Wilde, 'The Birthday of the Infanta' (1891), p. 45.

### **‘The Cult of Velázquez’: From Painting to Text**

In a letter dated 12 November 1891 to Mrs W.H. Grenfell, to whom Wilde dedicated ‘The Birthday of the Infanta’ in *A House of Pomegranates*, Wilde explained that his primary inspiration for ‘The Birthday of the Infanta’ came from the Spanish visual arts: ‘it is about the little pale Infanta whom Velasquez painted’.<sup>23</sup> Wilde assumed that Mrs W.H. Grenfell would not only be acquainted with the work of the Spanish master, but that she would appreciate the connection.<sup>24</sup> Indeed, Wilde’s interest in Velázquez, which he shows in his writing and letters during the period 1880–1900 with repeated allusions to the painter’s genius, corresponds with the gradual rediscovery and appreciation of Velázquez in late nineteenth-century British society. As Kenneth McConkey notes, ‘consciousness of Spanish art, and Velazquez in particular, crucially conditioned the visual intelligence of two generations, becoming absorbed into a coherent set of attitudes and practices concerning the way the world was observed and recorded.’<sup>25</sup> Some of the reasons behind this attraction, McConkey adds, were the ‘notable style attributes, coded paint marks, through which artists effectively colluded with chosen identities and forms of self-presentation — in tune with the expressive character of the age.’<sup>26</sup> As a result, Impressionists, Aesthetes and Decadents would all feel a sort of kinship with Velázquez’s art.

Velázquez was far from unknown to the British before the *fin de siècle*. Some of the earliest studies of his life and work were produced, indeed, by an Englishman.

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<sup>23</sup> Wilde, *The Complete Letters of Oscar Wilde*, p. 493.

<sup>24</sup> Mrs W.H. Grenfell was Ethel ‘Ettie’ Grenfell, Baroness Desborough (née Ethel Anne Priscilla Fane) (1867–1952). She was a member of the Souls, a group of wealthy politicians and intellectuals from 1885 to about 1920 who considered themselves to have superior aesthetic and intellectual taste to that of their philistine contemporaries.

<sup>25</sup> McConkey, p. 189.

<sup>26</sup> McConkey, p. 189.



With *Velázquez and His Works* (1855), William Stirling Maxwell aimed to compile a definitive list, or ‘catalogue raisonné’, of Velázquez’s paintings. Some Victorian painters, writers and travellers had also attempted interpretations of both the quality and significance of Velázquez’s earlier work and court pictures.<sup>27</sup> As Paul Stirton notes, their views, however, were anecdotal and documentary, and less rooted in the qualities of paint, naturalism and proto-Impressionism that were to inspire *fin-de-siècle* artists.<sup>28</sup> The switch towards a greater appreciation of Velázquez at the end of the nineteenth century in Britain came from France.

In nineteenth-century France, Spanish art witnessed a surge in popularity after King Louis Philippe I acquired nearly five hundred Spanish paintings and opened the Spanish Gallery in the Louvre in 1838.<sup>29</sup> In the 1860s, the painters Édouard Manet (1832–1883), Carolus-Duran (1837–1917), and their followers were impressed with these works and travelled to study, in particular, Velázquez’s paintings at the Prado Museum in Madrid. As the Surrealist Spanish painter (and ardent admirer of Velázquez) Salvador Dalí (1904–1989) would later declare, ‘without Velasquez [...] and without the Prado Museum, neither Monet nor Manet would have existed.’<sup>30</sup> Nineteenth-century French critics and writers such as Théophile Gautier, Charles Baudelaire, Charles Blanc, and Théophile Thoré-Bürger, among many others, wrote about the modernity of Velázquez’s Naturalist and proto-Impressionist style, encouraging others to visit the Prado Museum in Madrid to see his works.<sup>31</sup>

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<sup>27</sup> The painter John ‘Spanish’ Phillip (1817–1867) and the writer Richard Ford (1796–1858), for example. See Stirton, p. 107.

<sup>28</sup> Stirton, p. 108.

<sup>29</sup> Enriqueta Harris, ‘Murillo in Britain’, in *Spanish Art in Britain and Ireland, 1750–1920*, ed. by Nigel Glendinning and Hilary Macartney (Woodbridge: Tamesis, 2010), p. 233.

<sup>30</sup> Alain Bosquet, *Conversations with Dalí*, trans. by Joachim Neugroschel (New York: E.P. Dutton, 1969), p. 49: ‘Sans Velázquez, [...] comme sans le musée du Prado, ni Monet ni Manet n’auraient existé’.

<sup>31</sup> For more on nineteenth-century French artists and writers’ interest in Spanish painting see Isle Hempel Lipschutz, *Spanish Painting and the French Romantics* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press,

Responding to this French *espagnolisme*, British painters who opposed the Establishment began finding in the paintings of Velázquez the motifs, gestures and technical devices that would enable them to formulate a modern aesthetics. The Anglo-American painter James McNeill Whistler was one of the first to openly use Velázquez in his work in his series of portraits of the 1870s and 1880s. Living mostly in Paris from 1855, he studied Velázquez at the ‘Art Treasures’ Exhibition in Manchester in 1857.<sup>32</sup> Stirton considers *Arrangement in Grey and Black No.2: Portrait of Thomas Carlyle* (1872–3) the first attempt ‘at the sort of fluid brushwork and polychromatic “blacks” that were associated with Velázquez’s greatest works.’<sup>33</sup> The most explicit homages, however, are found in later portraits such as *Arrangement in Black No.3: Sir Henry Irving as Philip II of Spain* (1876), *Arrangement in Flesh Colour and Black: Portrait of Théodore Duret* (1884), and *Arrangement in Black: Portrait of Señor Pablo de Sarasate* (1894), the musician referred to in the introduction to this thesis. As Stirton notes, these paintings rely on Velázquez’s *Pablo de Valladolid* (c. 1635) for ‘their bold stance, the importuning gesture and the loosely brushed ground plane.’<sup>34</sup>

Another major artist to seek inspiration from Velázquez was the American expatriate painter, John Singer Sargent. He had trained in Paris under Carolus-Duran, who reputedly tormented his students with the exhortation of ‘Velasquez, Velasquez, Velasquez, ceaselessly study Velasquez’.<sup>35</sup> As mentioned in the first chapter of this thesis, Sargent visited Spain in 1880 to study the work of Velázquez, admiring his

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1972), and *Manet/Velázquez: The French Taste for Spanish Painting*, ed. by Gary Tinterow and Geneviève Lacambre (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2003).

<sup>32</sup> Braham, p. 36.

<sup>33</sup> Stirton, p. 107.

<sup>34</sup> Stirton, p. 107.

<sup>35</sup> ‘Velasquez, Velasquez, Velasquez, étudiez sans relache Velasquez,’ quoted in Evan Charteris, *John Sargent* (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1927), p. 28.

technique and his understanding of human physiognomy, which served him in his own later portraits of Victorian and Edwardian society figures. *The Daughters of Edward Darley Boit* (1882), and *An Interior in Venice* (1899), are both direct responses to *Las Meninas* (1657), a picture that was only just emerging as the great ‘modern’ masterpiece that we recognise it as today.

Stirton suggests that, in the last quarter of the nineteenth century, Velázquez was, indeed, at the centre of the split between all the progressive painters of the New English Art Club, the Glasgow School, and other groupings, and the figures of the Establishment. To illustrate this, Stirton examines the confrontation that took place between the English painter and student of Whistler, Walter Sickert, and Frederic Leighton (1830–1896) in 1889. On 8 September of that year, Sickert made a blunt and unequivocal link between Velázquez and the Impressionists by declaring ‘Velasquez was an Impressionist’.<sup>36</sup> Two months later, on 10 December 1889, Frederic Leighton devoted his annual address to the students of the Royal Academy to the character and shortcomings of the Spanish School.<sup>37</sup>

Leighton saw Velázquez as the finest of the Spanish painters, but considered that his work was weakened by his role as an obsequious courtier. For Stirton, the difference between these two attitudes towards the art of Velázquez — one ‘anecdotal and assessed by moral association’, and the other ‘unashamedly aesthetic’, seeking to connect the lessons of the past with modern ideals — signals the ‘gulf’ that was opening up between the Establishment and the ‘new “secessionist”’ groups in Britain.<sup>38</sup> Velázquez appears, then, as the paradigm of the clear switch from classicism — represented by the Pre-Raphaelites and associated artists — towards an aesthetics

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<sup>36</sup> Sickert, ‘Topical Interviews: Mr Walter Sickert on Impressionist Art’, p. 56. The interview was originally published in *The Sun* on 8 September 1889.

<sup>37</sup> Stirton, p. 109.

<sup>38</sup> Stirton, p. 109.

of modernity. It is not surprising, then, that Aubrey Beardsley (1872–1898) would envision Whistler as a Velazquian character; he drew the *Portrait of Whistler in Spanish 17th Century Costume* (1892–1898) in clear reference to the Spanish master.

The Velázquez painting that perhaps most epitomised the emerging British tradition of painting in the manner of Velázquez was *Philip IV of Spain in Brown and Silver* (1635) — the same painting mentioned at the beginning of this chapter that Wilde wished to look at the National Portrait Gallery. The ornamental title given to this painting by the Gallery —originally entitled *Portrait of Philip IV* — soon after its acquisition in 1882, suggests that Velázquez was being interpreted through Whistler’s and his followers’ aesthetic.

Alongside painters, critics and writers were instrumental in expanding knowledge of Velázquez in Britain between 1880 and 1910, with an increasing number of writings published on the painter. The keystone of this widening knowledge was the translation of the German Carl Justi (1832–1912)’s monumental *Velazquez and his Times* (1889), which took a historical approach. In contrast, late nineteenth-century British Aesthete and Decadent critics and writers anointed Velázquez as the father of Impressionism. This correlation is not surprising: if Aesthete and Decadent writers shared a desire to capture the moment’s sensations, the Impressionist painters wanted to excite visual vibrations by blending colours in the eyes of the spectators. Both writers and painters shared an insistence on the processual dynamics of the dramatised instant, in which momentary vision was delineated by extremes of darkness and light.

One of the first critics to highlight Velázquez’s proto-Impressionism was Vernon Lee. In 1884, Lee remarked in *Euphorion* that the portraits of Velázquez were ‘mere hints’, or impressions, of what people really were; Velázquez showed only the

temperament and potentiality of his people, leaving the spectator ‘to find out what life, what feelings and actions, such a temperament implies.’<sup>39</sup> Crucially, Lee acknowledged that Velázquez afforded equal power in art to both beauty *and* ugliness; making ‘beauty out of ugly things’.<sup>40</sup> ‘Ugliness, nay, repulsiveness, vanish, subdued into beauty, even as noxious gases may be subdued into health-giving substances by some cunning chemist,’ wrote Lee, stressing how Velázquez managed to make ‘those scrofulous Hapsburgs no longer mere men, but keynotes of harmonies of light’.<sup>41</sup> This ugliness ‘subdued into beauty’ reveals a crucial aesthetic–ethical duality, which invests even deformity with a sense of subtle finesse. In a similar vein, Lee wrote of Philip IV, Wilde’s ‘pale evil king’:

To Velasquez the flaccid yellowish fair flesh, with its grey downy shadows, the limp pale drab hair, which is grey in the light and scarcely perceptibly blond in the shade, all this unhealthy, bloodless, feebly living, effete mass of humanity called Philip IV of Spain, shivering in moral anaemia like some dog thorough bred into nothingness, becomes merely the foundation for a splendid harmony of pale tints.<sup>42</sup>

This extreme description of the ‘unhealthy’ king that becomes ‘splendid’ in Velázquez’s hands anticipates what Wilde would later do in ‘The Birthday of the Infanta’; it emphasises Velázquez’s ability to show that decay and deformity were integral parts of human existence. Lee’s response to the effect of the painting raises questions about illness, bodies and the different ways in which we gaze at and represent them. Wilde would embrace the ‘unhealthiness’ depicted by Velázquez, as I demonstrate later in the chapter. Lee, however, exhibited a certain uneasiness in her

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<sup>39</sup> Vernon Lee, *Euphorion: Being Studies of the Antique and the Mediaeval in the Renaissance*, 2 vols. (London: T. Fisher Unwin, 1884), ii, pp. 40–41.

<sup>40</sup> Lee, *Euphorion*, ii, p. 45.

<sup>41</sup> Lee, *Euphorion*, ii, p. 43; p. 40.

<sup>42</sup> Lee, *Euphorion*, ii, p. 42.

description of the ‘realist’ Spanish painter’s portraits, of the aforementioned Philip IV, and, also, of the Spanish Infanta:

The poor little baby princess, with scarce visible features, seemingly kneaded (but not sufficiently pinched and modelled) out of the wet ashes of an *auto da f *, in her black-and-white frock (how different from the dresses painted by Raphael and Titian!), dingy and gloomy enough for an abbess or a camariera major, this childish personification of courtly dreariness, certainly born on an Ash Wednesday.<sup>43</sup>

In line with the ideas analysed in the first chapter of this thesis, the Aesthete in Lee valued Vel zquez’s mastery of innovative techniques and his ability to reveal beauty in ugliness, but the moralist in her sensed something amiss in his dark characters. Lee makes an explicit comparison between the ‘idealistic painter’ Raphael and the ‘realistic artist’ Vel zquez.<sup>44</sup> To a certain extent, Lee aligned herself with the Pre-Raphaelites’ and Aesthetic reception of Vel zquez, whereas Wilde represented a step further in a Decadent appreciation of the Spanish painter, as I demonstrate later.

The key Aesthetic text on Vel zquez remains, however, ‘The Point of Honour’, published in 1890 by the writer Alice Meynell (1847–1922). Echoing Sickert’s 1889 remarks, Meynell also stated in her essay that Vel zquez was ‘the first Impressionist’.<sup>45</sup> For Meynell,

So little indeed are we shut out from the mysteries of a great Impressionist’s impression that Velasquez requires us to be in some degree his colleagues. Thus may each of us to whom he appeals take praise from the praised: He leaves my educated eyes to do a little of the work. He respects my responsibility no less [...] than I do his.<sup>46</sup>

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<sup>43</sup> Lee, *Euphorion*, ii, p. 42.

<sup>44</sup> Lee, *Euphorion*, ii, pp. 41–42.

<sup>45</sup> Alice Meynell, ‘The Point of Honour’, *Merry England*, November 1890, p. 60. The essay was reprinted in Meynell first collection of essays, *The Rythm of Life* (1893).

<sup>46</sup> Meynell, ‘The Point of Honour’, p. 61.

The play on words Meynell uses by alluding to the ‘Impressionist’s impression’ enacts the notion of the duality of the gaze that so interested *fin-de-siècle* authors, including Wilde. Hilary Fraser notes how, in this text, Meynell was identifying in Velázquez’s art qualities that Foucault developed in his discussion of *Las Meninas* in *The Order of Things* (1966) half a century later: ‘the painter’s emphasis on the reciprocity of the gaze, and his disruption of the idea that painting is the representation of an objective visual order.’<sup>47</sup>

Meynell’s ideas on the Impressionism of Velázquez were further developed by art critics, most notoriously Robert Alan Mowbray (R.A.M) Stevenson (1847–1900). Scottish painter, critic and cousin of Robert Louis Stevenson, he had studied in Paris with Carolus-Duran, and frequented Wilde’s aesthetic circles in London. For several years he had tried, unsuccessfully, naturalistic painting, which made him aware of the significant gap between mere description, ‘and the skill that matches brushwork to a new way of seeing and feeling’.<sup>48</sup> His book *The Art of Velasquez* (1895) is a volume more focused on giving spirited impressions of the character of Velázquez’s art rather than offering facts, much in the manner in which the portraits of Whistler and Sargent suggest Velázquez’s work.

Stevenson’s book on Velázquez was, indeed, an appraisal of Velázquez’s painterly technique, and his critical evaluation was seen through the lens of his own artistic training and interests. He identified Velázquez’s crowning achievement as ‘unity of impression’ and also considered Velázquez the first Impressionist.<sup>49</sup> Stevenson also found naturalistic tints in Velázquez: ‘Various stages of his growth, as shown in the Prado, remind us of various stages in the progress of modern

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<sup>47</sup> Hilary Fraser, *Women Writing Art History in the Nineteenth Century* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014), p. 8.

<sup>48</sup> Stirton, p. 109.

<sup>49</sup> Stevenson, pp. 122–23.

naturalism.’<sup>50</sup> Then, he linked that naturalist approach with the current Impressionist School, in which ‘Sudden gusts of his fancy for some type or some quality in nature ally this or that canvas by Velasquez with the work of a man or a movement in our century. The names of Regnault, Manet, Carolus-Duran, Henner, Whistler, and Sargent, rise to one’s lips at every turn in the Prado.’<sup>51</sup>

Lee, Meynell and Stevenson were joined in their conception of the seventeenth-century Spanish artist by Arthur Symons. In an essay on Balzac published in 1899 in the *Fortnightly Review* and then included in the 1919 edition of *The Symbolist Movement in Literature*, Symons wrote of the French author’s *realist* novels that ‘there, stepping out of the canvas, as the sombre people of Velazquez step out of their canvases at the Prado, is the living figure, looking into your eyes with eyes that respond to you like a mirror.’<sup>52</sup> Those ‘eyes with eyes’ and the mirror trope confirm Velázquez’s *fin-de-siècle* identification with the duality of the gaze, the double perceptions, and echo Wilde’s words in the preface to *The Picture of Dorian Gray* that ‘it is the spectator, and not life, that art really mirrors’.<sup>53</sup>

The artist, illustrator and critic Charles Ricketts (1866-1931) merits a final, special mention in this exploration of the significance of Velázquez in the *fin de siècle*, as he was the designer of *A House of Pomegranates*, the volume in which Wilde’s ‘The Birthday of the Infanta’ was included. In 1903 Ricketts published *The Prado and its Masterpieces*, expanding on Velázquez, its *Meninas* and other paintings of ‘exquisite’ and ‘enchanted’ infantas.<sup>54</sup> In a similar vein to his contemporaries, Ricketts emphasised Velázquez’s impressionistic techniques: ‘It is as if the painter

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<sup>50</sup> Stevenson, p. 14.

<sup>51</sup> Stevenson, p. 14.

<sup>52</sup> Arthur Symons, ‘Balzac’, *Fortnightly Review*, May 1899, p. 755.

<sup>53</sup> Oscar Wilde, *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, in *Collins Complete Works of Oscar Wilde* (Glasgow: HarperCollins, 2003), p. 17.

<sup>54</sup> Charles Ricketts, *The Prado and its Masterpieces* (London: Archibald Constable, 1903), pp. 95–96.



[Velázquez] had been conscious that his pictures tended to look more like a reflection in a mirror than to revive the aspect of realities which had taken so great a hold upon him.’<sup>55</sup> During 1904 Ricketts also published several articles on Velázquez in *The Burlington Magazine*.

Velázquez thus became a major point of reference for British artists and writers at the turn of the century. Reviewing the last four books that had been published on Velázquez between 1888 and 1898, an anonymous critic wrote in *The Edinburgh Review* in 1901 that ‘After two centuries of neglect Velazquez now occupies a position which is, we should imagine, without parallel in the history of art. He is no longer an old master, he has become a living influence on modern painting; it is as if he had recently opened a studio.’<sup>56</sup> Such was Velázquez’s momentum that he superseded the Italian High Renaissance painters, as critic and editor of *The Academy* Charles Lewis Hind (1862–1927) noted in his book *Days with Velasquez* (1906): ‘I realised to what extent Velasquez had become the painters’ painter, when Mr. George Murray, winner in 1901 of the Gold Medal and Travelling Studentship of the Royal Academy Schools, elected to go, not to Italy, but to Madrid, to study and copy Velasquez’.<sup>57</sup>

### **Conceiving a Velazquian Tale**

Oscar Wilde began envisioning a Velazquian tale in this context, in which both the Spanish painter’s naturalistic *and* impressionistic attributes were first recuperated and later attained hegemonic status. Already in 1882, Wilde alluded to Whistler’s infatuation with Velázquez in his short prose piece ‘Mrs Langtry as Hester

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<sup>55</sup> Ricketts, p. 84.

<sup>56</sup> ‘Velazquez’, in *The Edinburgh Review*, January 1901, p. 133.

<sup>57</sup> C. Lewis Hind, *Days with Velasquez* (London: Adam and Charles Black, 1906), p. 25.

Grazebrook'. In addition, he hinted at the Velazquian palette of silver-grey and pink that he would replicate in 'The Birthday of the Infanta':

As regards Hester Grazebrook's dresses [...] the masterpiece was undoubtedly the last, a symphony in silver-grey and pink, a pure melody of colour which I feel sure Whistler would call a *Scherzo*, and take as its visible motive the moonlight wandering in silver mist through a rose-garden; unless indeed he saw this dress, in which case he would paint it and nothing else; for it is a dress such as Velasquez only could paint, and Whistler very wisely always paints those things which are within reach of Velasquez only.<sup>58</sup>

Wilde and Whistler's relationship had always been 'nervous', as Richard Ellmann notes in his biography of Wilde.<sup>59</sup> Velázquez, I suggest, played a prominent role in sustaining this tension. 'Whistler, twenty years older, could never quite accept that Wilde, however imperfect his early writings, had genius too', writes Ellmann.<sup>60</sup> The tension between the two increased in 1885. Whistler had begun to nurture a certain resentment of Wilde since the writer's speech to the art students of the Royal Academy in 1883. He had offered unreservedly his suggestions then, but he 'disliked hearing Wilde credited with ideas he regarded as his own'.<sup>61</sup> Whistler then decided to do something unprecedented for him, and gave a lecture himself. What eventually became known as 'Mr Whistler's "Ten O'Clock"' was mostly devoted to scorning Wilde. Without naming him, he accused Wilde of a series of wrongdoings, including dilettantism about dress reform. For Whistler, what the Aesthete wanted was costume, but 'costume [was] not dress'.<sup>62</sup>

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<sup>58</sup> Oscar Wilde, 'Mrs Langtry as Hester Grazebrook', in *Collins Complete Works of Oscar Wilde* (Glasgow: HarperCollins, 2003), p. 943. This piece was originally published in *New York World* on 7 November 1882.

<sup>59</sup> Richard Ellmann, *Oscar Wilde* (London: Hamish Hamilton, 1987), p. 254.

<sup>60</sup> Ellmann, p. 255.

<sup>61</sup> Ellmann, p. 255.

<sup>62</sup> James McNeill Whistler, *Mr Whistler's 'Ten O' Clock'* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1888), p. 24. This text was first delivered as a public lecture at Prince's Hall, Piccadilly, on 20 February 1885.

Reviewing the lecture in the *Pall Mall Gazette*, Wilde lamented that the painter had spent most of his time mocking the majority; one of Whistler's targets, Wilde noted, were 'dress reformers', to which Wilde, alluding deliberately to Velázquez, asked, 'Did not Velasquez paint crinolines? What more do you want?'<sup>63</sup> Whistler thought himself mocked by Wilde, leading to a total breakdown of their friendship. Later, Wilde seems to have struck at Whistler again, basing the murdered artist in his novel *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (1890, 1891) on Whistler and using Velázquez, again, as a tool with which to attack his rival: 'a man can paint like Velasquez and yet be as dull as possible.'<sup>64</sup>

We can see a similar criticism in his earlier story, 'The Birthday of the Infanta', which can be seen as Wilde's first attempt to confront Whistler in fiction, by way of Velázquez. Wilde had always differed with Whistler on the latter's belief that painting was a higher form of art than poetry. For Wilde, 'the poet is the supreme artist, for he is the master of colour and of form, and the real musician besides, and is lord over all life and all arts; and so to the poet beyond all others are these mysteries known'.<sup>65</sup> As Velázquez was one of Whistler's main artistic references, Wilde ventured to reproduce Velázquez's art in writing in order to demonstrate to Whistler that it was possible to recreate art through writing, the different medium allowing for paradoxically greater fidelity to Velázquez's extremes of light and shade, both formal and ethical.

Artistic battles aside, it is clear that Oscar Wilde chose Velázquez's paintings for their specific artistic resonance around the *fin de siècle*. Wilde's particular choice of motif for his tale — Velázquez's later depictions of infantas and dwarfs — suggests

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<sup>63</sup> Oscar Wilde, 'Mr. Whistler's Ten O' Clock', in *Collins Complete Works of Oscar Wilde* (Glasgow: HarperCollins, 2003), p. 949. This article was originally published in *The Pall Mall Gazette* on 21 February 1885.

<sup>64</sup> Oscar Wilde, *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, in *Collins Complete Works of Oscar Wilde* (Glasgow: HarperCollins, 2003), p. 152.

<sup>65</sup> Wilde, 'Mr. Whistler's Ten O' Clock', p. 949.

an engagement with both the Impressionist techniques discussed above and with Decadent tropes (the deformed Dwarf). The poet Katharine Bradley (1846–1914) provided relevant information on Wilde’s selection of paintings for his story; on 22 July 1890 Bradley wrote in her journal that, the previous day, Wilde had told her:

A whole story of the Infanta of Velasquez in the Louvre, with a pink rose in her hand. He was bent on learning the story of that rose, and found it in a portrait near at hand, of a dwarf. Now the princess — let history go off with her rags — had given the dwarf that rose — the dwarf was dancing before the court, and she took it from her hair and flung it to him. He went away in rapture at the consciousness of her love ... then the doctrine of doubles, and inattention on my part—ultimately the dwarf discovers from a mirror his own hideousness and when they come in and try to rouse him to dance, lies stretched responseless. He is dead — dead, they tell the princess, of a broken heart. She replies, going away — ‘Let those who love me have no hearts.’<sup>66</sup>

Wilde travelled to Paris extensively in the 1880s and moved there between February and mid-May 1883. At that time, the Louvre had holdings of two of Velázquez’s Infanta’s paintings. One depicted the Infanta Maria Teresa (1638–1683) when she was fourteen years old and the other one the Infanta Margarita Teresa (1651–1673) when she was approximately five — both infantas were daughters of Philip IV of Spain.<sup>67</sup> It has been suggested that, in the tale, Wilde was referring to the Infanta Margarita Teresa — featured most famously in *Las Meninas* — but, most likely, Wilde used all these paintings for inspiration, as there are elements of all in the description of the Infanta in the tale:

Her robe was of grey satin, the skirt and the wide puffed sleeves heavily embroidered with silver, and the stiff corset studded with rows of fine pearls. Two tiny slippers with big pink rosettes peeped out beneath her dress as she walked. Pink and pearl was her great gauze fan, and in her hair, which like an

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<sup>66</sup> Michael Field, *Works and Days. From the Journal of Michael Field*, ed. by T. and D.C. Sturge Moore (London: John Murray, 1933), p. 136.

<sup>67</sup> See the Atlas database of the Louvre, which covers all the works exhibited in the museum: [http://cartelen.louvre.fr/cartelen/visite?srv=crt\\_frm\\_rs&langue=en&initCritere=true](http://cartelen.louvre.fr/cartelen/visite?srv=crt_frm_rs&langue=en&initCritere=true)

aureole of faded gold stood out stiffly round her pale little face, she had a beautiful white rose.<sup>68</sup>

Wilde's Infanta was twelve years of age, her hair 'like an aureole of faded gold stood out stiffly round her pale little face', and she had a robe with 'puffed sleeves heavily embroidered with silver, and the stiff corset studded with rows of fine pearls', which mimics Velázquez's Infanta Maria Teresa (fig. 10). Nonetheless, 'the pale little face', 'the robe of grey satin' and the combination of silver and pink colours in her portrait mirrors the depiction of Infanta Margarita Teresa in *Las Meninas* (fig. 11). In the painting of Margarita Teresa in the Louvre, moreover, she even holds a rose in her hand (fig. 12).

As for the painting of the dwarf that Wilde mentioned in his account to Bradley, there were no holdings of Velázquez's paintings of dwarfs in the Louvre in the 1880s. Wilde's Dwarf in 'The Birthday of the Infanta', however, bears close resemblance to Velázquez's *Portrait of Francisco Lezcano* or *Niño de Vallecas* (fig. 13), a hydrocephalic jester at the court of Philip IV of Spain. The mountains can be seen in the right-hand background. He is shown with his head slightly tilted and his right leg stuck out, in a pose possibly meant to imply his physical or psychological disability. He may have been painted while accompanying the king on a hunt, as he is wearing hunting attire and is depicted in the open air. Similarly, the Dwarf in Wilde's tale had 'crooked legs' and a 'huge misshapen head' and 'had been discovered only the day before, running wild through the forest, by two of the nobles who happened to have been hunting in a remote part of the great cork-wood that surrounded the town.'<sup>69</sup> *Las*

<sup>68</sup> Wilde, 'The Birthday of the Infanta' (1891), p. 29.

<sup>69</sup> Wilde, 'The Birthday of the Infanta' (1891), pp. 40–41.



Fig. 10      Diego Velázquez, *The Infanta Maria Teresa*, 1652–1653, oil on canvas, 60.5 × 71.5 cm, Louvre Museum, Paris.



Fig. 11      Diego Velázquez, *Las Meninas*, 1656, oil in canvas, 318 × 276 cm, Prado Museum, Madrid.





Fig. 12      Diego Velázquez, *Infanta Margarita*, c. 1653–1655, oil on canvas, 70  
× 58 cm, Louvre Museum, Paris.





Fig. 13      Diego Velázquez, *Portrait of Francisco Lezcano or El Niño de Vallecas*, c. 1635–1645, oil on canvas, 107 × 83 cm, Prado Museum, Madrid.

*Meninas* also depicted, notoriously, two dwarfs: the achondroplastic Maribarbola and the Italian Nicolas Pertusato, but none of them quite fit Wilde's description (fig. 11).

Velázquez's portraits in the Louvre, then, may have initially inspired Wilde's story but he presumably relied on copies of other Velázquez's paintings that he saw elsewhere (engravings in periodicals and oil painting reproductions).<sup>70</sup> Whichever specific paintings inspired Wilde, it is certain that he found Velázquez's work aesthetically relevant to his own literary project, and he used it as an imaginative springboard to investigate notions of beauty, deformity and the corruption of innocence.

It is also the case that Wilde chose motifs from Velázquez's later period (all the paintings mentioned above correspond roughly to his late career). In *The Prado and its Masterpieces* (1903) Charles Ricketts wrote that, in Velázquez's last works, 'we no longer find the go and dash of his equestrian groups or his "Admiral", or of the "Pope"; but a more [...] wistful outlook upon the human face.'<sup>71</sup> His last paintings, he added, 'have the faces of men who have thought and suffered.'<sup>72</sup> Along the same lines, Carl Justi described that the painter's objective at this later stage was 'painting what one really sees, not what one fancies one sees or infers'.<sup>73</sup> R.A.M Stevenson also emphasised in 1895 that the style of the 'large impressionistic canvases of [Velázquez's] later life' is founded on 'the pursuit of more than unusually just and subtle modelling, a modelling which changes character with the size of the canvas,

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<sup>70</sup> For a detailed description of the etchings and copies of Velázquez's works available in the 1880s in Britain, see, for example, Charles Boyd Curtis, *Velazquez and Murillo: A Descriptive and Historical Catalogue of the Works of Don Diego de Silva Velazquez and Bartolomé Esteban Murillo* (London: Sampson Low, Marston, Searle and Rivington, 1883).

<sup>71</sup> Ricketts, pp. 95–96.

<sup>72</sup> Ricketts, p. 96.

<sup>73</sup> Carl Justi, *Diego Velazquez and His Times*, trans. by A.H. Keane (London: H. Grevel, 1889), p. 389.

with the width or narrowness of the field of view, and with the position near or far from the focus of impression of an object to be modelled.’<sup>74</sup>

Once more, therefore, Velázquez mattered to the *fin de siècle* for interconnected thematic and formal reasons. On the one hand is the subject of ‘suffering men’, but, on the other, these subjects are mediated by the painterly techniques that reproduce ‘what one really sees’ through strokes — impressions — and unusual use of colour. These aspects of Velázquez’s work seem fundamental for Oscar Wilde, as they pervade his Velazquian tale. Wilde told the poets Katharine Bradley and Edith Cooper (Michael Field) that he had conceived ‘The Birthday of the Infanta’ ‘in black and silver’ — Velázquez’s, and Whistler’s, preferred palette — which already displays a dual, subjective notion of what is perceived as darkness and what as light.<sup>75</sup> The first thing that attracts attention in the tale is indeed, colour.

Velázquez’s subtle dark tonalities and pink, grey and silvery tints are obsessively echoed throughout the tale: the Infanta’s robe is grey, her fan is pink and pearl, the King is ‘wrapped in a dark cloak’, and the throne is ‘covered with a rich pall of black velvet studded with silver tulips and elaborately fringed with silver and pearls’.<sup>76</sup> One of the rooms in the palace is also covered ‘with a pink-flowered Lucca damask, patterned with birds and dotted dainty blossoms of silver.’<sup>77</sup> By overly detailed, excessive descriptions and constant allusions to colour, Wilde replicated Velázquez’s Spanish Baroque technique, like visual Impressionism registering the impressions we get when looking at a painting, one by one. Likewise, Wilde opens ‘The Birthday of the Infanta’ with a bright and delicate description of the little princess, who, it will later be discovered, masks a dark and heartless cruelty: a mirror

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<sup>74</sup> Stevenson, pp. 93–94.

<sup>75</sup> Michael Field, *Works and Days*, p. 137.

<sup>76</sup> Wilde, ‘The Birthday of the Infanta’ (1891), p. 30; pp. 54–55.

<sup>77</sup> Wilde, ‘The Birthday of the Infanta’ (1891), p. 56.

in characterisation and narrative time of Velázquez's tendency to paint dark backgrounds with bright, vibrantly coloured subjects in the foreground.

As Anne Markey observes, Wilde's tale is 'effectively a mirror' that reveals its true self to the reader, in much the same way that Velázquez's *Las Meninas* unfolds the drama of perception through its playful invocation of meta-spectation.<sup>78</sup> The work's intricate and enigmatic composition poses questions about illusion and reality; it fosters an unsettling relationship between the figures depicted and the viewer. The painting depicts a grand room in the Royal Alcazar of Madrid during the reign of King Philip IV of Spain, and displays several figures from the Spanish court. Some seem to be looking out of the canvas towards the viewer, while others are interacting with each other. The young Infanta Margarita Teresa, in the centre of the foreground, is surrounded by her entourage of two ladies-in-waiting or *meninas*, a chaperone, a bodyguard or *guardadamas*, two dwarfs and a dog. To the left of the scene, just behind them, Velázquez depicts himself working at a large canvas. Velázquez is looking outwards, beyond the pictorial space to where a viewer of the painting would stand. To the rear and at right stands the queen's chamberlain at an open doorway that reveals space behind. Also on the back, to the left of the chamberlain, a mirror reflects the upper bodies and heads of the king and queen.

In a similar vein, Markey notes, Wilde foregrounds the Infanta but draws attention to supporting characters in the story, whose presence 'alters the perspective from which the reader views life at the Spanish court'.<sup>79</sup> Like Velázquez's painting, the effect of Wilde's story is unsettling and ambiguous; it creates impressions. As much as Velázquez's proto-Impressionist technique, his themes and characters are

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<sup>78</sup> Markey, p. 159.

<sup>79</sup> Markey, p. 159.

also equally crucial elements in Wilde's creation of such an ambiguous and unsettling effect. In order to illustrate the aesthetics and ethics that Wilde negotiates in his story, I thus need to trace the context which these characters emerge from: Velázquez's Spanish Baroque. Velázquez's work exhibited, indeed, a uniquely *Spanish* historical and cultural context that Wilde used, firstly, as a tool to propose alternative aesthetic truths and, secondly, as a mirror to reflect the ethical concerns of his own times and society. The seventeenth-century Spanish Baroque, with its play of light and shade, excess, violence, melancholia, and sumptuousness ornament, fitted Decadent motifs and obsessions. As I move on now to explore, Wilde found the *decadence* of the Spanish Baroque in the overly precious, the overly deformed and in its outrageous proportions.

### **Aesthetics of the Spanish Baroque: The 'sombre splendour' of the Court**

In 'The Birthday of the Infanta', Wilde recreated the 'sombre splendour' of the Spanish Baroque court through elusive allusions to morbid historical details, and through an excessively rich prose, which allowed him to explore the nature of perception.<sup>80</sup> Like many of the other stories included in *A House of Pomegranates*, the style of 'The Birthday of the Infanta' was criticised in the contemporary press as tedious and 'ultra-aesthetic', 'better suited for the catalogue of a high art furniture dealer'.<sup>81</sup> Yet Wilde unapologetically defended his lavish narrative: 'In style [...] it is

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<sup>80</sup> Wilde, 'The Birthday of the Infanta' (1891), p. 30.

<sup>81</sup> 'Mr. Oscar Wilde's "House of Pomegranates"', *The Pall Mall Gazette*, 30 November 1891, p. 3. An anonymous writer in *The Saturday Review* also noted on 6 February 1892: 'We are not sure that Mr. Wilde's manner of telling it [The Birthday of the Infanta] is quite the right one.'

my best story.’<sup>82</sup> He saw his excessive style as both exquisite and integral to the tale’s characterisation and subject matter. The overly detailed descriptions of the palace interiors match the overornamented Spanish Baroque style and contribute towards the creation of the stifling court atmosphere. There is an obsessive focus on describing beautiful objects, fabrics and furniture:

The hangings were of gilt Cordovan leather, and a heavy gilt chandelier with branches for three hundred wax lights hung down from the black and white ceiling. Underneath a great canopy of gold cloth, on which the lions and towers of Castile were brodered in seed pearls, stood the throne itself covered with a rich pall of black velvet studded with silver tulips and elaborately fringed with silver and pearls.<sup>83</sup>

This exhaustive description of items emphasises, on one hand, the aesthetic value of the art objects, but, on the other, it devalues them in its excess — the arrangement becomes too much for the eye, which struggles to perceive anything concretely. As a result, the description poses questions of influence and class, as well as issues of individual taste, distinction and refinement that I explore further below. It also displays a revealing chromatic dichotomy in which everything is either black or white, gold or silver. Indeed, the Spanish history of the seventeenth century, packed with the bright and dark tonalities that Velázquez portrays in his painting, is instrumental in Wilde’s tale.

Some scholars have attempted to analyse historically the atmosphere that Wilde recreates in ‘The Birthday of the Infanta’. John Sloan argues that Wilde set the tale in the seventeenth-century court of Philip IV of Spain at the time of the Inquisition, while Horst Schroeder first and Jarlath Killeen later have suggested that Wilde’s king

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<sup>82</sup> In late July 1889, Oscar Wilde wrote to Robert Ross: ‘I am charmed with what you say about the little Princess — the Infanta: in style (in *mere* style as honest Besant would say) it is my best story.’ Wilde, *The Complete Letters of Oscar Wilde*, p. 409.

<sup>83</sup> Wilde, ‘The Birthday of the Infanta’ (1891), p. 54.

is in fact Philip IV's son, King Charles II of Spain (1661–1700).<sup>84</sup> I propose here that Wilde — as he did with Velázquez's paintings — most likely blended both figures in his story. For Wilde, Realism is an imitative action; true art should be imaginative and stimulate further images.<sup>85</sup> The 'truth' of this impressionistic tale's historical backdrop is to be found, then, in the unfactual and the imaginative.<sup>86</sup> By mixing both historical figures, Wilde handpicked the most sumptuous and the most morbid events, altering the visual perception of the reader, as presented by and through the verbal texture.

Velázquez was the leading artist in King Philip IV's court, and painted several portraits of Philip IV, but none of Charles II (he was born one year after Velázquez's death). As Wilde's direct inspiration for his tale was Velázquez's work, it seems plausible to surmise that Philip IV was Wilde's king. Charles II did not have any offspring, which in strict historical terms would also rule him out as a model for Wilde's father of the Infanta. However, Wilde describes the Infanta's father as 'the sad melancholy King', which much better illustrates the figure of Charles II than of Philip IV. Charles II was noted for his extensive physical, intellectual, and emotional disabilities for which he was called in Spain '*el hechizado*' ['the bewitched']. The grandeur-melancholy dichotomy is instrumental in Wilde's tale, and, as I demonstrate later, is in direct dialogue with the figure of the simple, happy Dwarf. In 'The Birthday of the Infanta', the king pathetically remembers his dead wife,

as he had seen her first at the Castle of Fontainebleau, when he was but fifteen years of age, and she still younger. They had been formally betrothed on that occasion by the Papal Nuncio in the presence of the French King and all the

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<sup>84</sup> See Schroeder (1988), Killeen (2007) and Sloan (2010).

<sup>85</sup> According to Wilde, 'The moment Art surrenders its imaginative medium it surrenders everything. As a method Realism is a complete failure'. Oscar Wilde, 'The Decay of Lying', in *Collins Complete Works of Oscar Wilde* (Glasgow: HarperCollins, 2003), p. 1091.

<sup>86</sup> 'Truth is independent of facts always, inventing or selecting them at pleasure'. Oscar Wilde, 'The Truth of Masks', in *Collins Complete Works of Oscar Wilde* (Glasgow: HarperCollins, 2003), p. 1166.

Court, and he had returned to the Escorial bearing with him a little ringlet of yellow hair [...] Later on had followed the marriage, hastily performed at Burgos, a small town on the frontier between the two countries, and the grand public entry into Madrid with the customary celebration of high mass at the Church of La Atocha, and a more than usually solemn *auto-da-fé*, in which nearly three hundred heretics, amongst whom were many Englishmen, had been delivered over to the secular arm to be burned.<sup>87</sup>

Schroeder deems that this passage ‘harks back to Charles II’s marriage by proxy’, contracted at Fontainebleau, and to the ensuing wedding ceremony at Quintanapalla, a village a few miles away from Burgos — ‘hastily performed’ because of the critical state of health of the Archbishop of Burgos on the one hand, and the King’s impatience on the other.<sup>88</sup> Yet Philip IV and his first wife Elisabeth of France (1602–1644), who was born at Fontainebleau, married in Burgos, and held a great reception in Madrid. Wilde’s historical accuracy appears, like Velázquez’s proto-impressionistic brush, unfocused.

The only book in English available in the 1880s on the history of the late Hapsburg kings of Spain was *Memoirs of Spain during the Reigns of Philip IV and Charles II* (1834), by the Scottish historian John Colin Dunlop. The book contains multiple and significant factual and phrasal parallels with Wilde’s tale, which suggests that Wilde would have been familiar with Dunlop’s book. However, it is most likely that Wilde would have been inspired by a number of Victor Hugo’s fictional texts that displayed the *espagnolisme* discussed in the introduction to this thesis and the fascination with the idea of ‘Black Spain’.

Hugo’s poetic drama *Ruy Blas* (1838) for instance, is set at the time of Charles II’s second marriage. It tells the story of Ruy Blas, an indentured commoner — and a poet — who, like Wilde’s Dwarf, dares to love the Spanish queen. Hugo also drew on

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<sup>87</sup> Wilde, ‘The Birthday of the Infanta’ (1891), p. 31.

<sup>88</sup> Horst Schroeder, ‘Some Historical and Literary References in Oscar Wilde’s “The Birthday of the Infanta”’, *Literatur in Wissenschaft und Unterricht*, 21:4 (1988), 289–292 (p. 289).



some historical sources for his play, but, like Wilde, took a degree of imaginative licence with these historical sources, using them for his own dramatic purposes.<sup>89</sup> As Benjamin W. Wells noted, Hugo's dramatic theory of contrasts, of the 'grave and gay, tragic and grotesque' are pushed in *Ruy Blas* to its utmost verge.<sup>90</sup> Victor Hugo's 'La Rose de l'infante', a poem published in the first series of *La Légende des siècles* (1859) and inspired by Velázquez's portrait of the Infanta Maria Margarita housed in the Louvre, has also been noted as having influenced Wilde's tale.<sup>91</sup> Indeed, both Wilde's story and Hugo's poem use the figure of the Infanta, as painted by Velázquez, to show that 'a will of steel exists beneath her superficial air of childish innocence and grace'.<sup>92</sup>

Wilde, then, borrowed the events and characters from Dunlop's volume and Hugo's texts that more dramatically displayed the cruel grandeur of the Spanish court. In his tale, for instance, Wilde wrote that 'later on had followed the marriage, hastily performed at Burgos [...] and the grand public entry into Madrid with the customary celebration of high mass at the Church of La Atocha, and a more than usually solemn *auto-da-fé*'.<sup>93</sup> This perverse celebratory scene echoes several of Dunlop's descriptions, such as 'after the wedding in Burgos, the new Princess of Asturias was thence conducted in full state to Madrid'; 'they alighted at the church of Our Lady of Atocha, where *Te Deum* was sung'; and 'the officers of the Inquisition had proclaimed, in the *Plaça Mayor*, to the sound of trumpets and cymbals, an Auto-da-Fe for that day month. Such a spectacle had not been witnessed in Madrid for forty years'.<sup>94</sup>

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<sup>89</sup> Scholars agree that some of these sources are Madame d'Aulnoy's *Memoirs de la cour d'Espagne, Relation du voyage d'Espagne* (1690), Alonso Nuñez de Castro's *Solo Madrid es corte* (1675) and Jean de Vayrac's *État présent d'Espagne* (1718). For more information on Hugo's use of historical sources in *Ruy Blas*, see, for example, H. Carrington Lancaster, 'The Genesis of "Ruy Blas"', *Modern Philology*, 14 (1917), 641–646.

<sup>90</sup> Benjamin W. Wells, *Modern French Literature* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1909), p. 216.

<sup>91</sup> Markey, p. 162.

<sup>92</sup> Markey, p. 163.

<sup>93</sup> Wilde, 'The Birthday of the Infanta' (1891), p. 31.

<sup>94</sup> John Colin Dunlop, *Memoirs of Spain during the Reigns of Philip IV and Charles II*, 2 vols (Edinburgh: Thomas Clark, 1834), i, p. 7; ii, p. 16; ii, p. 202.

There is a specific account in Wilde's tale — included in both Dunlop's historical volume and Hugo's fictional *Ruy Blas* — which particularly highlights the twisted decay of the Spanish court. Shortly before Charles II's death, when he was physically and mentally exhausted, writes Dunlop, he fled from the capital and sought refuge in the cloistered palace of the Escorial, where he descended into the Pantheon and ordered the royal coffins to be opened:

He long and earnestly contemplated the remains of his first Queen Louisa D'Orleans, which bore few traces of dissolution and exhibited a countenance scarcely less blooming than when alive. He at length exclaimed, 'I shall soon be with her in heaven.'<sup>95</sup>

Wilde described in his tale that 'nearly twelve years' after the queen's death, her embalmed body

was still lying in the black marble chapel of the Palace [...] Once every month the King, wrapped in a dark cloak [...] went in and knelt by her side, calling out, '*Mi reina! Mi reina!*' and sometimes [...] he would clutch at the pale jewelled hands in a wild agony of grief, and try to wake by his mad kisses the cold painted face.'<sup>96</sup>

Wilde's dramatic use of the Spanish *mi reina* [my queen] also seems borrowed from Dunlop, who writes that, when Charles II met Marie Louise of Orléans (1662–1689) 'he saluted her in the Spanish manner, by pressing her arms with his two hands, and repeatedly calling her *Mireyna, Mireyna* [my Queen, my Queen in old Spanish spelling]'.<sup>97</sup>

In fact, the Infanta's mother in Wilde's tale, having come 'from the gay country of France [...] had withered away in the sombre splendour of the Spanish court, dying

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<sup>95</sup> Dunlop, ii, p. 307.

<sup>96</sup> Wilde, 'The Birthday of the Infanta' (1891), p. 30.

<sup>97</sup> Dunlop, ii, p. 163.

just six months after the birth of her child, and before she had seen the almonds blossom twice in the orchard'.<sup>98</sup> She was not unlike the historical Marie Louise, who had been 'worn out by the forbidding atmosphere of her new home and had met a premature death at the age of twenty-six.'<sup>99</sup> In both cases there were rumours of death by poison: Marie Louise was believed to have been food-poisoned by the ambassador, and the Infanta's mother was said to have been murdered 'by means of a pair of poisoned gloves.'<sup>100</sup> In both Dunlop's historical and Wilde's fictional accounts, the death of the queen left her husband, in spite of all his material possessions, heartbroken. Wilde's choice of events and of language persistently portrays the oppressive Spanish court's aesthetics of extremes, in which gloom combined with artificial opulence leads to decay.

Most of the minor characters of Wilde's story are also loosely borrowed from Spanish history: the 'Marquess de Las-Torres' seems to be a version of the Duke of Medina de las Torres, son-in-law of the famous Count-Duke of Olivares (1587–1645), Spanish royal favourite of Philip IV and minister. The 'little Monsieur de Lorraine, the son of the French Ambassador at Madrid' replicates the French Charles IV, Duke of Lorraine (1604–1675). The 'grim Duchess of Albuquerque [...] the Camerera [*sic*]' is inspired by the real María de la Cueva y Toledo, Duchess of Albuquerque and *camarera mayor* [First Lady of the Bedchamber] of Philip II's queen, who also featured in Hugo's *Ruy Blas*.

Inspired by Velázquez's paintings, then, Wilde turned to the Spanish Baroque and its seventeenth-century events and characters, finding a history of grandeur and decay that fitted his aesthetic and ethical intentions. To borrow the same phrasing he

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<sup>98</sup> Wilde, 'The Birthday of the Infanta' (1891), p. 30.

<sup>99</sup> Schroeder, p. 290.

<sup>100</sup> Wilde, 'The Birthday of the Infanta' (1891), p. 32.

used to describe Honoré de Balzac's (1799–1850) work, with 'The Birthday of the Infanta' Wilde created an 'imaginative reality'.<sup>101</sup> He offered his own textual *impression* in order to make an aesthetic and ethical critique, in which the boundaries between fact and imagination become blurred. Commenting on the artist's need to subordinate the factual aspects of history to artistic motive in 'the Truth of Masks' (1891), Wilde stated: 'Subordination in art does not mean disregard of truth; it means conversion of fact into effect, and assigning to each detail its proper relative value.'<sup>102</sup> In 'The Critic as Artist' (1891) Wilde also claimed that the task of the artist, particularly the prose artist, was to rewrite history.<sup>103</sup>

In the style of a Paterian imaginary portrait, Wilde's 'The Birthday of the Infanta' is thus set at a turning-point in cultural history as the basis for an impressionistic study of abnormal characters (the Spanish court) who bring disaster upon themselves.<sup>104</sup> With his tale, Wilde anticipated views of the twentieth-century Surrealist Spanish painter Salvador Dalí, when he underscored the ways in which Velázquez's paintings — like Wilde's tale — revealed and structured the nature of Spanish court life at the same time that his use of colour approached the spontaneity of Impressionism:

Vigor and energy predominate in Velázquez's pictures; their contours of acute crude lines give in the beginning a deep impression of abruptness that is soon diminished by the deep and calm expression of his semblances [...] The pictures of people of high lineage, kings, nobles, proud, cynical, self-important, of sparkling eyes with luminous flashes and reflections of hatred;

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<sup>101</sup> Oscar Wilde, 'Balzac in English', in *Collins Complete Works of Oscar Wilde* (Glasgow: HarperCollins, 2003), p. 959. This article was originally published in *The Pall Mall Gazette* on 13 September 1886.

<sup>102</sup> Oscar Wilde, 'The Truth of Masks', p. 1168.

<sup>103</sup> 'The one duty we owe to history is to re-write it'. Oscar Wilde, 'The Critic as Artist', in *Collins Complete Works of Oscar Wilde* (Glasgow: HarperCollins, 2003), p. 1121.

<sup>104</sup> In 'Mr. Pater's Imaginary Portraits', *The Pall Mall Gazette*, 11 June 1887, Wilde notes that Pater 'does not weary us with any definite doctrine or seek to suit life to any formal creed. He is always looking for exquisite moments and, when he has found them, he analyses them with delicate and delightful art and then passes on, often to the opposite pole of thought or feeling, knowing that every mood has its own quality and charm and is justified by its mere existence.'

of men stultified by vice or innocent and spoiled princesses; dwarfs and jesters full of secret and deep melancholy; all these figures full of force and life reveal a Spain to us that Velázquez copied — better we would say ‘created’, taking it from reality [...] The distribution and positioning of the colors seem in certain cases those of an ‘impressionist.’<sup>105</sup>

In ‘The Birthday of the Infanta’ Wilde equally confronted the ‘sombre splendour’ of the Spanish court with the intention to reveal a new, alternative aesthetic reality to his readers: decadence can be beautiful, and beauty can be decadent. Wilde showed how the magnificent Spanish court, opposed to joy, laughter, and all spontaneous feelings, elevates pain into pageantry and suffocates life by ceremony. The notions of ‘Sorrow’ and ‘Beauty’ are brought together: ‘The King of Spain was already wedded to Sorrow, and [...] though she was but a barren bride he loved her better than Beauty’.<sup>106</sup> Rodney Shewan has noted how everything in the palace partook of death.<sup>107</sup> It was a place where lifeless copies replaced living things — a sort of a Baudrillardian hyperreal space of deadliness.<sup>108</sup> Sun and stars — the melancholy king’s favourite devices — were embroidered, together, on black velvet. The tapestry represented a hunt, and had been woven to divert a mad King. There was a cabinet on which Holbein’s *Dance of Death* (1493) was aptly engraved. All the horror, the blackness, the melancholy and death stood out against an artificial, life-in-death prettiness.

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<sup>105</sup> Salvador Dalí, ‘Los grandes maestros de la pintura. El Greco’, quoted in William Jeffett, ‘Dalí and the Spanish Baroque: From Still Life to Velázquez’, *Avant-garde Studies*, 2 (2016), 1–25 (p. 22) <[http://thedali.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/11/proceedings-JEFFETT\\_en\\_edits\\_11.25\\_final.pdf](http://thedali.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/11/proceedings-JEFFETT_en_edits_11.25_final.pdf)>:

‘El vigor y la energía predominan en los retratos de Velázquez; sus contornos de líneas crudas y agudas dan al principio una impresión honda de brusquedad, que disminuye luego por la profunda y tranquila expresión de sus semblantes [...] Los retratos de personas de alto linaje, Reyes, nobles, orgullosos, cínico, persuadidos de valor, de ojos centelleantes con ráfagas luminosas y reflejos de odio; de hombres embrutecidos por el vicio o princesas inocentes y mimadas; enanos y bufones llenos de secreta y profunda melancolía; todas estas figuras llenas de fuerza y de vida, nos revelan una España que Velázquez copió — mejor diríamos “creó,” tomándola de la realidad. [...] La distribución y colocación de los colores, parece en ciertos casos de un “impresionista”.

<sup>106</sup> Wilde, ‘The Birthday of the Infanta’ (1891), p. 32.

<sup>107</sup> Shewan, p. 60.

<sup>108</sup> See Jean Baudrillard, *Simulacres et Stimulation* (Paris: Galilée, 1981).

This beautiful melancholia teases and destabilises the reader's own visual conceptions; it represents a paradoxical painterly idea that Julia Kristeva, writing on Holbein's work, has described as 'the idea that truth is severe, sometimes sad, often melancholy', and yet, 'beyond melancholia', it 'constitutes beauty'.<sup>109</sup> Kristeva questions:

Can the beautiful be sad? Is beauty inseparable from the ephemeral and hence from mourning? Or else is the beautiful object the one that tirelessly returns following destructions and wars in order to bear witness that there is survival after death, that immortality is possible? [...] There might thus be something that is not affected by the universality of death: beauty?<sup>110</sup>

Wilde's figure of the melancholy king, surrounded by the magnificence of his court, embodies this sad beauty. His most beautiful, appreciated object is his deceased wife: every time he visits the queen's embalmed body, he 'would clutch at the pale jewelled hands in a wild agony of grief, and try to wake by his mad kisses the cold painted face'.<sup>111</sup> Her hands wear jewels, and her face resembles a painting: beautiful objects amid the disastrous anguish of loss.

Kristeva's ideas mentioned above are framed within her theory of the 'Black Sun', which takes its name from a poem by the French poet Gérard de Nerval (1808–1855). Written in French but entitled in Spanish, 'El Desdichado' [The Wretched] (1853, 1854), the poem is yet another example of the *espagnolisme* that took over French Romanticism and extended to Britain. For Kristeva, the title itself points to the strangeness of the text: 'its Spanish resonance [...] shrill and trumpeting beyond the word's woeful meaning, contrasts sharply with the shaded, discreet vowel pattern of

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<sup>109</sup> Julia Kristeva, *Black Sun: Depression and Melancholia*, trans. by Leon S. Roudiez (New York: Columbia University Press, 1992), p. 127.

<sup>110</sup> Kristeva, *Black Sun*, pp. 98–99.

<sup>111</sup> Wilde, 'The Birthday of the Infanta' (1891), p. 30.

the French language and appears to herald some triumph or other in the very heart of darkness.’<sup>112</sup> Kristeva identifies here the same Spanish ‘sombre splendour’ that Wilde highlighted in ‘The Birthday of the Infanta’. In the poem, Nerval wrote: ‘My lone *star* is dead — and my bespangled lute / Bears the *black Sun* of *Melancholia*.’<sup>113</sup> Kristeva emphasises that the ‘black sun’ takes up the semantic field of ‘saturnine’, but ‘pulls it inside out, like a glove: darkness flashes as a solar light, which nevertheless remains dazzling with black invisibility.’<sup>114</sup>

In Wilde’s tale, darkness and brightness are equally brought together. Wilde displays the full glare of the Spanish sun next to shady images and scenes; ‘the bright pitiless sunlight mocked’ the king’s sorrow; the Infanta questioned the king’s decision to go to the ‘gloomy chapel’ when ‘the sun was shining so brightly, and everybody was so happy.’<sup>115</sup> Wilde here approaches an idea of truth as contradiction. Light and darkness embodied could only be understood together through artistic exploration, as he acknowledged in ‘The Truth of Masks’ (1891): ‘For in art there is no such thing as a universal truth. A Truth in art is that whose contradictory is also true. And just as it is only in art-criticism, and through it, that we can apprehend the Platonic theory of ideas, so it is only in art-criticism, and through it, that we can realize Hegel’s system of contraries. The truths of metaphysics are the truths of masks.’<sup>116</sup> The aesthetics of extremes of the Spanish court, with its contradictions of magnificent melancholia, of beautiful darkness, appears as a revelatory emblem of this ‘truth of masks’.

There is yet another ‘contradictory’ aspect of the Spanish court that Wilde took from Velázquez’s paintings and served to enunciate not only the aesthetics, but also

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<sup>112</sup> Kristeva, *Black Sun*, p. 144.

<sup>113</sup> Gérard de Nerval, *Les Filles du feu* (Paris: D. Giraud, 1854), p. 19: ‘Ma seule étoile est morte, — et mon luth constellé / Porte le *Soleil noir* de la *Mélancolie*’.

<sup>114</sup> Kristeva, *Black Sun*, p. 147.

<sup>115</sup> Wilde, ‘The Birthday of the Infanta’ (1891), pp. 33–34.

<sup>116</sup> Wilde, ‘The Truth of Masks’, p. 1173.

the ethics, ingrained in the tale: the relationship between the Spanish royal family and their buffoons and dwarfs. Carl Justi saw in Velázquez's series of portraits of buffoons, jesters and dwarfs only the 'Spanish taste for buffoonery'.<sup>117</sup> He explained that 'the shackles by which the Spanish spirit was fettered, the taste for trivial details, the juxtaposition of mediaeval and modern culture — the former surviving far longer in Spain than elsewhere, all this produced frictions, whence flashed the spark of comedy.'<sup>118</sup> I explore the ethical significance of these frictions, which also informed Wilde's tale, in the following and last section of this chapter.

### **Ethics of the Spanish Baroque: The 'grotesque comic' of the Dwarf**

Carl Justi placed a particular emphasis on the inherent relation between humour and the grotesque in seventeenth-century Spain. He explained, quoting Carl Friedrich Flögel, that, 'owing to their extravagant and heated imagination, the Spaniards surpassed all European peoples in the "grotesque comic."<sup>119</sup> For Justi, 'the serious and burlesque, the elevated and the vulgar, ecstasy and blasphemy, were never more freely interwoven in poetry, art and religion' than in the seventeenth century.<sup>120</sup> Velázquez's paintings of dwarfs were thus a reflection of his society:

As the stale jokes of the *graciosos* [clowns, dwarfs] were indispensable to the pathetic drama, and the ridiculous monstrosities to every Corpus Christi procession, so also one of the Court painter's inevitable tasks was to paint the royal clowns, whose portraits formed a traditional embellishment of certain parts of the king's palaces.<sup>121</sup>

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<sup>117</sup> Justi, p. 433.

<sup>118</sup> Justi, p. 433.

<sup>119</sup> Justi, p. 433.

<sup>120</sup> Justi, p. 433.

<sup>121</sup> Justi, p. 434.



Justi noted a sense of normality within the Spanish court with this combination of grotesque and humour. In reference to Velázquez's *Portrait of Francisco Lezcano* (the jester on which Wilde presumably based his tale's Dwarf), Justi wrote that

at present [1888] we find it difficult to comprehend a state of social intellectual and aesthetic culture, which was capable of enduring, and could even take pleasure in, the daily association of such half-human beings. We look on them rather with horror and a feeling of pity [...] [Yet it] is merely an outcome of a morbid sentiment peculiar to the age.<sup>122</sup>

This normalisation of a 'morbid sentiment' that Justi disregarded was what, I argue, attracted Wilde. Justi's atavistic language of degeneration, describing dwarfs as 'half-human beings', is reversed in Wilde's tale.

Wilde's Dwarf, with 'his complete unconsciousness of his own grotesque appearance', was a *normal* and accepted character in the Spanish court.<sup>123</sup> The Spanish court thus inverted, in Bataillean terms, conventional notions of normalcy and difference; instead of defining the grotesque as different from the norm, Bataille argued that difference (or in his description, *heterology*) was in fact the norm.<sup>124</sup> The idea of describing 'deviations of nature', 'monsters' or 'freaks' as unnatural is, for Bataille, at odds with the fact that it is nature itself that naturally contains, or rather, insists upon, such forms.<sup>125</sup> This Bataillean idea advances some of the premises of the more recent discipline of disability studies, which challenge the view of disability as an individual deficit.<sup>126</sup> With his tale, Wilde was, then, bringing about the radical re-

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<sup>122</sup> Justi, p. 450.

<sup>123</sup> Wilde, 'The Birthday of the Infanta' (1891), p. 41

<sup>124</sup> Bataille defines heterology as 'the science of what is entirely other'. See Bataille, *Visions of Excess*, p. 102.

<sup>125</sup> Bataille, *Visions of Excess*, pp. 53–56.

<sup>126</sup> See, for instance, Rosemarie Garland-Thomson, *Extraordinary Bodies: Figuring Physical Disability in American Culture and Literature* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1997), and Martha Stoddard Holmes, *Fictions of Affliction: Physical Disability in Victorian Culture* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2004).

casting of the Spanish Baroque's representation of grotesque forms. 'The Birthday of the Infanta' articulates Wilde's politics of the physical deformity as an affirmative 'ethics of deviance', in a similar vein to that which Catherine Delyfer identifies in Lucas Malet's later use of Velázquez's art in *The History of Sir Richard Calmady* (1901), likely inspired by Wilde's tale.<sup>127</sup> Through the Spanish grotesque, Wilde thus reversed homogenising, middle-class Victorian notions of identity, system and order: Velázquez's Dwarf exposes oppositional ethical and political readings of the tale.

Recent scholarly work on Wilde's traditionally marginalised fairy tales has, indeed, emphasised how they can be regarded as contributing to the critical debates around the interplay between aesthetics and ethics.<sup>128</sup> For Wilde, both spheres were totally separate, but he never negated the existence of ethical considerations. He sought, as Alexandra Warwick puts it, to reverse what he saw as the tendency of contemporary society 'to collapse social and "moral" prejudices with ethics, and to assume the relevance of this unexamined reflex response to all aspects of existence.'<sup>129</sup> For Wilde, the artistic and imaginative self is not one that is divorced from the possibility of social efficacy, and his fairy tales, including 'The Birthday of the Infanta', are a prominent example of this view. Wilde's ethics centre around the idea that the imagination is sympathetic, and that the individual imagination fosters compassion for others. In 'The Soul of Man Under Socialism' (1891), Wilde claimed that 'When man has realised Individualism, he will also realise sympathy and exercise it freely and spontaneously'.<sup>130</sup> As Allison Pease notes, ethics in Wilde, are, then,

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<sup>127</sup> Catherine Delyfer, *Art and Womanhood in Fin-De-Siècle Writing* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2015), p. 84. Delyfer's reading is, indeed, based on intersectional disability studies.

<sup>128</sup> See, for example, Killeen (2007) and Alexandra Warwick, *Oscar Wilde* (Tavistock: Northcote, 2007).

<sup>129</sup> Warwick, p. 26.

<sup>130</sup> Oscar Wilde, 'The Soul of Man Under Socialism', in *Collins Complete Works of Oscar Wilde* (Glasgow: HarperCollins, 2003), p. 1195.

‘bound up with the idea of individual becoming, a process that is dependent on aesthetic consciousness. To be aesthetically conscious, to contemplate, is to act ethically.’<sup>131</sup>

In accordance with Wilde’s paradoxical personality, his fairy tales can be read as complex stories concealed beneath the mask of a supposedly naive and sometimes conservative form. Addressed to a dual audience — the ‘British child’ and the ‘British public’ — Wilde’s stories both challenged and reinforced bourgeois ideology, and subverted and advocated the ideals of Victorian Christianity.<sup>132</sup> Wilde dismissed his stories as slight or simple in some of the letters that accompanied copies of the books that he sent to friends, but in one he stated, crucially, that they are ‘an attempt to mirror modern life in a form remote from reality — to deal with modern problems in a mode that is ideal and not imitative’.<sup>133</sup>

For Warwick, Wilde’s fairy stories show versions of his political ideas and bear out many of the theoretical positions that he adopts in ‘The Soul of Man’; each of them, Warwick remarks, displays situations of poverty and deprivation, and, in many, absolute poverty is accompanied by images of dazzling wealth and splendour.<sup>134</sup> The critics of the time agreed with this perception. The *Pall Mall Gazette* reviewer remarked that the principal charm of the stories included in *A House of Pomegranates* was the way they touched on both ‘Socialist economics’ and ‘pathos’, while the *Saturday Review*’s critic saw in it a ‘deliberate provocation to the *bourgeois*

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<sup>131</sup> Allison Pease, ‘Aestheticism and Aesthetic Theory’, *Palgrave Advances in Oscar Wilde Studies*, ed. by Frederick S. Roden (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004), p. 112.

<sup>132</sup> In response to the *Pall Mall Gazette*’s review of *A House of Pomegranates*, Wilde wrote in early December 1891 to the periodical’s editor: ‘Now in building this *House of Pomegranates* I had about as much intention of pleasing the British child as I had of pleasing the British public’. Wilde, *The Complete Letters of Oscar Wilde*, p. 503.

<sup>133</sup> Oscar Wilde to the American novelist Amelie Rives (1863–1945), January 1889, quoted in Wilde, *The Complete Letters of Oscar Wilde*, p. 388.

<sup>134</sup> Warwick, p. 42.

*au front glabre.*'<sup>135</sup> Likewise, in 'The Birthday of the Infanta', Wilde interweaves aesthetic and ethical considerations by juxtaposing the figure of the kind-hearted and grotesque Dwarf with the cruel and magnificent Spanish court. Wilde replicated the Spanish 'grotesque comic' by creating, then, a social satire.

'The Birthday of the Infanta' depicts a bigoted and gloomy Spain governed by a court 'always noted for its cultivated passion for the horrible.'<sup>136</sup> The exquisite Infanta had no real understanding of human passions; she was moved to tears only by the puppet-play of *Sophonisba* because their gestures were, paradoxically, 'so extremely natural'.<sup>137</sup> In this tale of reflecting mirrors and unsettling gazes, Sophonisba, the Carthaginian noblewoman who chose suicide over Roman slavery, parallels the Dwarf, who eventually opted for death over the cruelty of the Infanta.<sup>138</sup> The adults of the court reacted in an equally perverse manner. The Chamberlain and the Grand Inquisitor relished the cruelty of the bullfight:

the young Count of Tierra-Nueva brought the bull to his knees, and having obtained permission from the Infanta to give the *coup de grâce*, he plunged his wooden sword into the neck of the animal with such violence that the head came right off and disclosed the laughing face of little Monsieur de Lorraine, the son of the French Ambassador at Madrid.<sup>139</sup>

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<sup>135</sup> 'Mr. Oscar Wilde's "House of Pomegranates"', *The Pall Mall Gazette*, 30 November 1891, p. 3; 'A House of Pomegranates', *The Saturday Review*, 6 February 1892, p. 160.

<sup>136</sup> Wilde, 'The Birthday of the Infanta' (1891), p. 41.

<sup>137</sup> Wilde, 'The Birthday of the Infanta' (1891), p. 36.

<sup>138</sup> Although beyond the remit of this chapter, there is an additional anti-imperialistic reading to this parallel between the Carthaginian Sophonisba, subdued by the Roman Empire; the Spanish Dwarf, subjected to the cruelty of Spanish imperialism through the figure of the Infanta; and even Wilde's (as an Irishman) uneven engagement with the British Empire. Considering that the tale is set in the immediate period before the start of Spanish Imperial decline, and published during a period of reassessment of the troubling scope of the British Empire, 'The Birthday of the Infanta' may also hint at the corruptions at the centre of imperial power: the artificial court-space where the drama unfolds.

<sup>139</sup> Wilde, 'The Birthday of the Infanta' (1891), p. 36.

Don Pedro, the king's brother, had recently 'hanged for sorcery in the marketplace two gypsies'. Other members of the court are described as living-dead: the Duchess had 'bloodless lips,' the king 'buried his face in his hands.'<sup>140</sup>

Unlike the people of the court, the grotesque Dwarf, representative of the common people, 'knew nothing of all this', and enjoyed nature rather than material things:

He liked the birds and the lizards immensely, and thought that the flowers were the most marvellous things in the whole world [...] For though he had never been in a palace before, he knew a great many wonderful things. He could make little cages out of rushes for the grasshoppers to sing in [...] He knew the cry of every bird, and could call the starlings from the tree-top, or the heron from the mere. He knew the trail of every animal [...] All the wind-dances he knew.<sup>141</sup>

In contrast to the 'dappled bee-haunted cells' of the foxgloves that the Dwarf loved, the chestnut's 'spires of white stars' and the hawthorn's 'pallid moons of beauty', the walls in the palace were covered with 'a pink-flowered Lucca damask, patterned with birds and dotted with dainty blossoms of silver.'<sup>142</sup> All the descriptions of the rooms of the Palace are written in a highly ornamental style that emphasises the artificiality of these luxurious surroundings. The Dwarf was unimpressed by the palace's splendour: 'He would not have given his rose for all the pearls on the canopy, nor one white petal of his rose for the throne itself. What he wanted was to see the Infanta [...] and to ask her to come away with him when he had finished his dance.'<sup>143</sup> Wilde is here reproducing his theoretical stance against private property, which

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<sup>140</sup> Wilde, 'The Birthday of the Infanta' (1891), p. 35, p. 33.

<sup>141</sup> Wilde, 'The Birthday of the Infanta' (1891), p. 49–50.

<sup>142</sup> Wilde, 'The Birthday of the Infanta' (1891), p. 56.

<sup>143</sup> Wilde, 'The Birthday of the Infanta' (1891), p. 55.

has really harmed Individualism, and obscured it, by confusing a man with what he possesses. It has led Individualism entirely astray. It has made gain not growth its aim. So that man thought that the important thing was to have, and did not know that the important thing is to be. The true perfection of man lies, not in what man has, but in what man is.<sup>144</sup>

The Dwarf was a selfless lover, whose love, however, was unrequited by the merciless ruler. It was paradoxically in ‘the most beautiful’ room in the palace, which epitomised the culmination of artificial beauty, that the Dwarf became aware of his monstrous appearance in front of a mirror.<sup>145</sup> The Dwarf, completely in love with his Infanta, suffered her heartless cruelty and the ruthlessness of all the court. The Infanta did not care about the Dwarf dying on the floor and ordered him to ‘dance for me’ before stamping her foot on him. Once she realised he would never dance for her again ‘because his heart is broken’, she carelessly ran out into the garden after stating ‘For the future let those who come to play with me have no hearts’.<sup>146</sup>

With this disturbing ending — that resonates with his famous aphorism about the death of Little Nell — Wilde condemns accepted power structures, or at least points to the illusion of the fixity of hierarchies.<sup>147</sup> Wilde resists demonising the ‘monster’ and invites the reader to empathise with the Dwarf and recognise his heroic humanity: the Dwarf has made up for his physical inferiority with his ethical superiority. Ugliness, abnormality, subjection and poverty — both material and spiritual — are confronted with notions of beauty, normality, power and property. The tale ultimately acts as a mirror for those who stigmatise (Decadent) deformity, but

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<sup>144</sup> Wilde, ‘The Soul of Man Under Socialism’, p. 1178.

<sup>145</sup> Wilde, ‘The Birthday of the Infanta’ (1891), p. 56.

<sup>146</sup> Wilde, ‘The Birthday of the Infanta’ (1891), p. 61.

<sup>147</sup> Wilde’s friend and writer Ada Leverson ascribed the following remark to him: ‘One must have a heart of stone to read the death of Little Nell without laughing’. Ada Leverson, *Letters to the Sphinx from Oscar Wilde, with Reminiscences of the Author* (London: Duckworth, 1930), p. 42.

cannot see their own; the real question in the tale, like in Velázquez's paintings, is to do with illusion and truth: who is the *real* monster?

But the tale's ethical judgement is ultimately withheld. Wilde guides the readers' sympathies through focalisation and dexterous shifts of perspective, but he does not indulge their moral expectations. The tale refuses to solve conflicting views in an eventually fatal resolution: the Dwarf dies. The sudden awareness of his grotesque figure constitutes the climax of the tale; the Dwarf comprehends that his inner beauty does replicate his external, ugly, appearance, and that physical beauty may conceal spiritual ugliness:

When the truth dawned upon him, he gave a wild cry of despair, and fell sobbing to the ground. So it was he who was misshapen and hunchbacked, foul to look at and grotesque. He himself was the monster, and it was at him that all the children had been laughing, and the little Princess who he had thought loved him — she too had been merely mocking at his ugliness, and making merry over his twisted limbs.<sup>148</sup>

The shattering realisation that appearances can be deceitful leads to the sudden rupturing of the Dwarf's innocence. Discovering that the ideal in which he had always believed is false constitutes a dramatic experience of horror. 'The Birthday of the Infanta' thus subverts the ethics of heroism in favour of a self-conscious aestheticism that verges on nihilism. The tale, much like Velázquez's paintings of dwarfs and the Spanish Baroque 'grotesque comic' they portray, ultimately exudes beautiful pathos. It does not reveal, to quote Wilde's own words, a 'universal truth', but 'the truth of masks':<sup>149</sup> Velázquez's truth of impression.

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<sup>148</sup> Wilde, 'The Birthday of the Infanta' (1891), p. 58–59.

<sup>149</sup> Wilde, 'The Truth of Masks', p. 1173.

## Conclusion

In Velázquez's *Las Meninas*, the king and queen are relegated to a mirror reflection: the central authority of the Spanish Empire is reduced, as Kenneth McConkey points out, to a 'mere symbol'.<sup>150</sup> What we have instead is a little theatre in which girls and dwarfs perform 'ritual manoeuvres'.<sup>151</sup> The artist stands amidst this majestic folly. Velázquez's apparent simplicity captured the 'essential emptiness' of Spanish imperial pomp and circumstance.<sup>152</sup> The painting destabilises notions of reality and illusion with its ultimate game of mirrors.

Like many of his fellow artists and writers, Oscar Wilde built on such implications of Velázquez's paintings to intimate alternative and ambivalent aesthetic and ethical possibilities at the turn of the century. Using Velázquez's palette of colours, his light–darkness binary, and his proto-Impressionist technique, Wilde created an ambiguous tale that critically exposes artificiality whilst depicting its beauty. With the 'sombre splendour' of the Spanish Golden Age as background, Wilde displays the aesthetic belief in beauty's independence from ethical considerations, while overtly dismantling such disconnection by conveying the disruptive *Spanish* elements of monstrosity, suffering, and death. As in *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, with 'The Birthday of the Infanta' Wilde shows that art can destroy all vital instincts by rejecting ugly realities; common life and beliefs are often depicted as ugly, and those being 'good' are not rewarded. Wilde simultaneously creates and deconstructs moral correction: a child-dwarf's world where art promotes an almost magical and supra-moral illusion, overshadowed by death. This ambivalent atmosphere arises from the

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<sup>150</sup> McConkey, p. 200.

<sup>151</sup> McConkey, p. 201.

<sup>152</sup> McConkey, p. 201.



melding of the excessively over-ornamental Spanish Baroque language with painterly techniques, and merging the ugly, the good and the poor with the sensual, the fatal, the rich and the violent.

Like Velázquez's paintings, Wilde's story develops, through constant 'impressions', metaphorical mirroring and echoing, the ambiguity of beauty and artificiality. Wilde used the paradoxical darkness and splendour of Velázquez's Spanish Baroque to illuminate the blurred boundaries between reality and illusion, and between beauty and ugliness, which themselves reflected back to itself the instability of middle-class Victorian aesthetic and moral values. Ultimately, in 'The Birthday of the Infanta' Oscar Wilde makes a parallel between art or artifice, darkness and splendour, subjecter and subjected.

This ambivalent imagery of dark splendour would be replicated in Wilde's later works. Gagnier notes how, in *A House of Pomegranates*, the book in which 'The Birthday of the Infanta' is included, the 'worship of materialism is described in a style as overblown' as in *Dorian Gray*; and, as in that novel, 'the worship of physical beauty is moralised.'<sup>153</sup> In 'The Birthday of the Infanta', Gagnier specifies, all those who are physically beautiful are cruel, like Dorian, and the reader sympathies with the Dwarf, 'who looks into the mirror and hates his image as much as Dorian loved his portrait'.<sup>154</sup> Shewan has also suggested that the Infanta is a juvenile version of the *femme fatale* who figures in *Salomé*.<sup>155</sup> For Shewan, the Infanta's resemblance to Salomé would be in the form 'of a further mirror image', in which Salomé falls in love with Iokanaan and dances for him, while the Dwarf dances for the Infanta and falls in love with her.<sup>156</sup> When Salomé dies, she comes face to face with 'the reality of a romantic dream built

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<sup>153</sup> Gagnier, *Idylls of the Marketplace*, p. 64

<sup>154</sup> Gagnier, *Idylls of the Marketplace*, p. 64.

<sup>155</sup> Shewan, p. 61

<sup>156</sup> Shewan, p. 61.

around Iokanaan'.<sup>157</sup> The Dwarf follows the same pattern in relation to the Infanta, who shares some of Salomé's temperament and inhabits an equally sterile place. In the end, as Edith Ellis put it in 1917, "'The Birthday of the Infanta' is symbolic of the whole tragedy of Oscar Wilde's life. It is impossible to read the story without a lump in one's throat. Wilde, till the blow fell which led to his arrest, had been frolicking, as it were, in a forest of fancies like the dwarf with the gipsies.'<sup>158</sup>

Velázquez's paintings, both ancient and modern, conservative and subversive, served Wilde to present his equally paradoxical aesthetical and ethical views. The Spanish Baroque and its 'grotesque comic' were used to illustrate the struggle with the aesthetic–ethical duality of art, or the paradoxical relation of inner morals and outer aesthetics. The aesthetics of extremes of seventeenth-century Spain, with its Inquisition, its Catholic guilt and grief, its deformed court dwarfs and implacable cruelty of rule, has accepted the universality of death, but it has also embraced bright magnificence: it represents how darkness and brightness, ugliness and beauty, sadness and happiness do coexist. The sharp final words of the Spanish Infanta, 'for the future let those who come to play with me have no hearts,' symbolically reflected the cruelty of the Spanish court, but also its magnificence, and its artificial grandeur. Velázquez's Spanish Baroque appears in Wilde's work as one of the most extreme, grotesque and ambivalent examples of art.

Ultimately, the Spanish Baroque embodies, in Arthur Symons' words, the same 'disease of form' and produces the same 'abnormal creatures' that are found in Decadence.<sup>159</sup> Symons, who crucially designated Impressionism and Symbolism (both tangible in Wilde's tale) as two central modes of Decadence, would also draw on the

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<sup>157</sup> Shewan, p. 61.

<sup>158</sup> Ellis, Edith Mary Oldham, 'A Note on Oscar Wilde', *Fortnightly Review*, 1 November 1917, p. 762.

<sup>159</sup> Symons, 'The Decadent Movement in Literature', p. 859; p. 856.

Spanish aesthetics of extremes. Arthur Symons found in the Spanish 'passion for the horrible' (as described by Wilde) an 'elemental' condition of the Spanish character that he merged with sensuality and voluptuousness. These Decadent, 'perverse pleasures' of Spain are the focus of my next chapter.

## 3.

**‘Elemental Passions’: Arthur Symons and the Primitivist Modernity of Spain**

And the maze you tread is as old as the world  
is old.<sup>1</sup>  
Arthur Symons (1899)

Spain represents, above all, the supreme  
manifestation of a certain primitive and eternal  
attitude of the human spirit.<sup>2</sup>  
Havelock Ellis (1908)

**Introduction**

In the winter of 1899, during his second visit to Spain, Arthur Symons (1865–1945) noted that ‘emotion, in the Spaniard, is based on a deep substratum of brooding seriousness; some kind of instinctive pessimism being always, even in those untouched by religion, the shadow upon life.’<sup>3</sup> Much like Vernon Lee and Oscar Wilde, Symons was intrigued by the dark and gloomy aesthetics he perceived in Spain. Yet, as this chapter shows, Symons was chiefly drawn to the contrast of that Spanish pessimism with the country’s light and its cult of the senses. For Symons, the extreme contrasts of Spain — light and darkness, violence and eroticism — were rooted in a

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<sup>1</sup> Arthur Symons, ‘To a Gitana Dancing (Seville)’, *Images of Good and Evil* (London: William Heinemann, 1899), p. 107.

<sup>2</sup> Ellis, *The Soul of Spain* (1908), p. vii-viii.

<sup>3</sup> Arthur Symons, ‘The Painters of Seville’, in *Cities and Sea-Coasts and Islands* (London: W. Collins, 1918), p. 25. This essay was written in 1899, but first published in January 1901 in the *Fortnightly Review*, and then reprinted in *Cities and Sea-Coasts and Islands*.

sort of primitive and perverse pleasure he found alluring: a ‘delight in violent sensations, sensations which seem to others not quite natural, partly perverse, partly cruel, as in the typical emotion of the bull-fight’.<sup>4</sup> As opposed to Vernon Lee, Symons delighted in the excessiveness of the Spanish nature, ‘ready to be startled into vivid life by any strong appeal: love, hate, cruelty, the dance, the bull-fight, whatever is elemental, or touches the elemental passions.’<sup>5</sup> My contention in this chapter is that, in the 1890s, Spain becomes for Symons the quintessential locus of Decadence, in which extreme, primal sensations are the norm.

As a result, I argue, Spain becomes the country most closely allied with a primitivism Symons considered necessary to counter the ‘terrible improvements of civilisation.’<sup>6</sup> In an illustratively Decadent paradox, Symons praised modernity as much as he condemned it, and Spain served to articulate this irresolution. Although Madrid showed ‘all the exciting accidents of the modern world’, Symons also appreciated Spain as a ‘living fragment of the past.’<sup>7</sup> The view of Spain as a country at once both modern and primitive, set within a dialectic of past and present, pervades much of Symons’ writings. By being, in Ellis’ phrase that provides the epigraph to this chapter, ‘eternal’, but also contingently *within* history, Spain appears as a space where modernity can occur, and where new sensations await to be explored.

This ‘elementality’ or primitiveness of Spain was connected to the Decadent quest for ‘*la vérité vraie*, the very essence of truth’ that Symons described in his

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<sup>4</sup> Arthur Symons, ‘Seville’, in *Cities and Sea-Coasts and Islands* (London: W. Collins, 1918), p. 17. This essay was written in 1898, but first published in March 1901 in *Harper Monthly’s Magazine*, and then reprinted in *Cities and Sea-Coasts and Islands*.

<sup>5</sup> Symons, ‘Seville’, pp.16–17.

<sup>6</sup> Primitivism understood throughout this chapter as Chris Baldick’s definition: ‘a preference for the supposedly free and contented existence found in a “primitive” way of life as opposed to the artificialities of urban civilisation’, in Chris Baldick, *The Oxford Concise Dictionary of Literary Terms* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), p. 204; Arthur Symons, *The Symbolist Movement in Literature* (New York: E. P. Dutton, 1919), p. 11.

<sup>7</sup> Symons, *The Symbolist Movement in Literature* (1919), p. 37; Arthur Symons, ‘A Spanish Novel’, *The Pall Mall Gazette*, 23 February 1892, p. 3.

pioneering article ‘The Decadent Movement in Literature’ (1893) published two years after his first trip to Spain in 1891.<sup>8</sup> In the essay, Symons described the ideal of literary Decadence as ‘a disembodied voice, and yet the voice of a human soul’, a phrase that, to quote Linda Dowling, ‘describes fin-de-siècle linguistic self-consciousness as it floated between the artificial dialect of literature and the “barbaric yawp” of vernacular speech.’<sup>9</sup> ‘Elemental’ and ‘primitive’ Spain — crucially connected to that notion of the vernacular and the disembodied — thus served Symons to formulate the extended version of that essay, *The Symbolist Movement in Literature* (1899, 1919).

That book, which was to become his most popular work and established him as the champion of French Symbolism, was completed not in France, but during Symons’ second visit to Spain. It is infused with ideas inspired by Spanish places and culture. In spite of the obvious connection and of Symons’ open admiration for Spain, his work has been barely connected to the country. Yet in 1931, in the volume *Wanderings*, Symons proclaimed his life-long obsession with Spain: “‘Stung by the splendour of a sudden thought,” there came to me, night after night, in Fountain Court, in the year 1891, the obsession of seeing what I could see, during a limited space of time, in Spain: that one country which I was afterwards to adore beyond all others.’<sup>10</sup> This chapter addresses this omission by exploring the fundamental role that ‘primitive and modern’ Spain played in the articulation of Symons’ criticism, as well as in his poetry and travel writing of the late 1890s.

Arthur Symons’ important role as a cultural commentator and theorist at the end of the nineteenth century and his subsequent influence on early twentieth-century

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<sup>8</sup> Arthur Symons, ‘The Decadent Movement in Literature’, *Harper’s New Monthly Magazine*, November 1893, p. 859.

<sup>9</sup> Symons, ‘The Decadent Movement in Literature’, p. 862; Linda Dowling, *Language and Decadence in the Victorian Fin de Siècle* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1986), pp. 214–15.

<sup>10</sup> Arthur Symons, *Wanderings* (London: J.M. Dent, 1931), p. 48.

literature is well established.<sup>11</sup> A prolific writer, editor, critic and translator, he penned hundreds of short stories, poems, plays and travel sketches. Symons contributed widely to contemporary and subsequent understandings of Decadence, Impressionism and Symbolism. He disseminated Symbolist theory among an elite, and was an advocate of Symbolist studies in dance, eroticism, and the stage. As an advocate of freedom of subject matter and literary style, he influenced the work of Modernist writers like W.B. Yeats, T.S. Eliot, Ezra Pound, James Joyce, Katherine Mansfield, Virginia Woolf and many others.

Symons' strong attachment to France, due primarily to his extensive and intense interest in French literature and culture, has obscured his life-long fascination with Spanish culture, as one among several forgotten geographies. It was his role as an international literary bridge between France and England that contributed to his categorisation as a truly cosmopolitan figure, but Symons lived out his view that the artist should be restless by travelling extensively. He spent long spells of time in France, Italy and Spain, but he also visited Belgium, Germany, Russia, Poland, Hungary, Austria, Switzerland, Turkey and the Czech Republic. For Symons, Max Beerbohm recalled, 'the new sights and sounds and odours braced the whole intelligence of a man and quickened his powers of creation.'<sup>12</sup> Symons saw himself as a 'vagabond' from his childhood; he felt that he had been 'born [...] cruel, nervous, excitable, passionate, restless, never quite human, never quite normal'.<sup>13</sup> Born in

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<sup>11</sup> See, for example, Karl Beckson, *Arthur Symons: A Life* (Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1987); Karl Beckson and John M. Munro, 'Introduction', in *Arthur Symons: Selected Letters, 1880–1935*, ed. by Karl Beckson and John M. Munro (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 1989); Petra Pointer, *A Prelude to Modernism: Studies on the Urban and Erotic Poetry of Arthur Symons* (Heidelberg: Universitätsverlag Winter, 2004); Jane Desmarais and Chris Baldick, 'Introduction', in *Arthur Symons: Selected Early Poems*, ed. by Jane Desmarais and Chris Baldick (Cambridge: Modern Humanities Research Association, 2017); and *Arthur Symons: Poet, Critic and Vagabond*, ed. by Stefano Evangelista and Elisa Bizzotto (Oxford: Legenda, forthcoming March 2018).

<sup>12</sup> Max Beerbohm, 'First Meetings with W.B. Yeats', BBC, 26 December 1954, quoted in Roger Lhombreaud, *Arthur Symons: A Critical Biography* (London: Unicorn Press, 1963), p. 127.

<sup>13</sup> Arthur Symons, *Dramatis Personae* (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1923), p. 133.

Wales to Cornish parents — he considered himself essentially Cornish by heritage — his father's work as a Wesleyan preacher entailed moving to a new location every three years. This upbringing led him to believe that he could never root himself in any place in the world, which, in exchange, had freed him 'from many prejudices' in giving him 'its own unresting kind of freedom'.<sup>14</sup>

Out of all the places he visited, I argue here, Spain occupies a prominent yet underexplored position. It is undeniable that in the 1890s 'a desire to imitate all things French was in the air' in England.<sup>15</sup> Yet, as discussed in the introduction to this thesis, many of the French writers and artists that Symons admired cultivated, in exchange, a certain *espagnolisme*, a nineteenth-century hispanophilia. Apart from engaging with the Spanish works of Alfred de Musset, Prosper Mérimée and Théophile Gautier, Symons must have also enjoyed in his trips to Paris the myriad of Spanish-themed salons and watched the spectacle of Spanish dancers.

A few critics have acknowledged the importance of Spain to Symons, but no systematic and wide-ranging exploration of his connection to the country has yet been undertaken. In *Arthur Symons: Critic of the Seven Arts* (1988), Lawrence W. Market offers a very broad overview of Symons' travel writing in Spain, and notes that 'it is clear that these two countries [Italy and Spain] were important to Symons, and his writings on them warrant further evaluation.'<sup>16</sup> Barry J. Faulk has also analysed Symons' first extensive theoretical statement on music-halls, 'A Spanish Music-Hall' (1892), written during Symons' first visit to Spain in 1891.<sup>17</sup> Yet, in order to fully

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<sup>14</sup> Symons, *Dramatis Personae*, p. 133.

<sup>15</sup> John M. Munro, *Arthur Symons* (New York: Twayne, 1969), p. 51.

<sup>16</sup> Lawrence W. Market, *Arthur Symons: Critic of the Seven Arts* (London: U.M.I. Research, 1988), p. 77.

<sup>17</sup> Barry J. Faulk, 'Camp Expertise: Arthur Symons, Music Hall, and the Defense of Theory', *Music Hall and Modernity: The Late-Victorian Discovery of Popular Culture* (Athens: Ohio University Press, 2004).



establish Symons as a model of Decadent cosmopolitanism, his strong attachment to Spanish culture and landscape requires deeper exploration and understanding.

Symons visited Spain twice, for three months in 1891 (between March and May) and for seven months in 1898 and 1899 (from October to April). The profound impact that the country made on him resulted in the publication of at least twenty-eight articles and reviews on different aspects of Spain in several periodicals between 1891 and 1927, fifteen of which form the section 'Spain' in *Cities and Sea-Coasts and Islands* (1918). In *Cities of Italy* (1907), Symons showed his intention to organise two major books of travel essays: 'Here I have brought together, into something more like unity, all that I have to say about Italy, and I hope later to do the same with my scattered writings, in "Cities" and elsewhere, on Spain'.<sup>18</sup> However, in 1908 and before he was able to complete his book on Spain, Symons had a mental breakdown in Italy. The section entitled 'Spain' mentioned above is thus the only collection he put together on that country. Alongside the criticism and travel writing, he also wrote at least twenty-five poems about or related to Spain, included in his works *Silhouettes* (1891), *Images of Good and Evil* (1899) and *Lesbia* (1920).<sup>19</sup>

Symons wrote the majority of his Spanish work during and immediately after his two visits to Spain and, consequently, this chapter deals mainly with his writings during the period 1891–1900. Yet Symons continued writing about the country in later years. As well as writing articles on Spain for several publications in the 1910s, he penned several unpublished notes on Spanish flamenco dancing in 1920 and 1921.<sup>20</sup> He also remained attached to the country through a number of Spanish friendships.

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<sup>18</sup> Arthur Symons, *Cities of Italy* (London: J.M. Dent, 1907), p. vii.

<sup>19</sup> In this last volume, *Lesbia*, the date of publication (1920) is quite misleading, since Symons wrote the majority of the poems included before his mental breakdown in Italy in 1908.

<sup>20</sup> Arthur Symons, *Notes on Spanish Dancers and Spanish Gypsies*, Box 13 Folder 18, Arthur Symons Papers, Department of Rare Books and Special Collections, Princeton University Library, Princeton New Jersey, USA.

Although beyond the scope of this chapter, in the 1920s Symons developed close friendships with a few members of the Spanish Modernist intelligentsia, such as Ramiro de Maeztu (1875–1936), Alejandro de la Sota (1891–1965), and Father José María de Elizondo (1878–1922), a Basque friar and respected scholar of St Francis notoriously referred to in Ezra Pound’s ‘Canto LXXXI’.

I have divided the chapter thematically, focusing on the two aspects of Spain that most profoundly inspired Symons’ work: Spain as place, and Spain as paradigm of popular culture. In order to grasp Symons’ intense and twofold relationship with the country and its culture, I uncover a dynamic of reception, reproduction and recreation; how Symons absorbed Spain and how he recreated it in his work. In the first part of this chapter, I thus discuss Symons’ Spanish travel prose and poetry — his reception of Spain as an evocative and a Symbolist place. The essential landscapes of modernity for Symons, the cities, play an altogether different role in non-industrial, ‘medieval’ Spain, which served the author to develop his aesthetics from Impressionism through the inclusion of Symbolist theories.<sup>21</sup> Although he acknowledged the modernity of some Spanish cities and of some Spanish artists, he preferred to focus on the primitive elements of the Spanish landscape and culture, which offered alternatives to the modern world and contrasted with the industrial, middle-class environment Symons disliked so intensely.

In the second half of the chapter, I then turn to Symons’ interest in Spanish popular culture. Symons was particularly fascinated by the primitiveness he found in the Spanish flamenco art form. Spanish flamenco music as Symons interprets it is the

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<sup>21</sup> ‘This living on of the Middle Ages, in a busy town, into the present, came home to me with singular force one Thursday morning as I went to the Cathedral Square to see the Tribunal of the Waters.’ Arthur Symons, ‘Tarragona’, in *Cities and Sea-Coasts and Islands* (London: W. Collins, 1918), p. 108. This essay was first published on 7 January 1899 in the *Saturday Review*, and then reprinted in *Cities and Sea-Coasts and Islands*.

expression of primal creative forces, nonetheless connected to modernity: ‘it is music before rhythm, music which comes down to us untouched by the invention of the modern scale, from an antiquity out of which plain-chant is a first step towards modern harmony.’<sup>22</sup> As the visionary critic he was, Symons reveals flamenco as an art form caught in transition, faltering between Romantic *Volksgeist*, Orientalist eroticism, and an emerging primitivist Modernism.

Indeed, for Symons flamenco was a constituent part, on one hand, of a Decadent discourse of sensuousness and pleasure, and, on the other, of a Symbolist and proto-Modernist discourse of primitivism. Symons often failed in revaluing the stereotype of the ‘native’ and ‘primitive’ as enigmatic and impenetrable, or in overcoming the objectifying view that ‘primitives’ were all the same. Yet, unlike other Romantic and Victorian tourists and writers, this chapter argues that Symons actively tried to elevate Spanish flamenco to high art. Before analysing Symons’ unique reception of Spanish popular culture, however, I need to chronologically retrace his steps in Spain to comprehend his relationship to the country as place, both as imaginary and as real space.

### **Spanish ‘Silhouettes:’ From Impression to Symbol**

Spain as a geo-cultural space played an instrumental role in Symons’ artistic development from childhood. In *Spiritual Adventures* (1905), Symons recalled how, on one occasion, he accompanied his father on a pastoral visit to Princetown prison, in Devon. Coming upon a copy of Cervantes’ *Don Quixote* in a warder’s house, he

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<sup>22</sup> Arthur Symons, ‘Moorish Secrets in Spain’, in *Cities and Sea-Coasts and Islands* (London: W. Collins, 1918), p. 102. This essay was first published on 12 August 1899 in the *Saturday Review*, and then reprinted in *Cities and Sea-Coasts and Islands*.

thought it was the ‘the most wonderful book [he] had ever seen.’<sup>23</sup> When he refused to give it up, ‘to be separated from it’, the warder said he could borrow it. When he returned home, a thunderstorm broke, and Symons recollected a scene suggesting the earliest effect of literature, and of Spain, on his imagination:

I clutched the book tight under my overcoat; the majesty of the storm mingled in my head with the heroic figure of which I had just caught a glimpse in the book; I sat motionless, inexpressibly happy, and when we reached home I had to waken myself out of a dream.<sup>24</sup>

Symons continued to assert that ‘no book had ever meant so much to me’, to the point that it was *Don Quixote* that awakened in Symons a ‘passion for reading’.<sup>25</sup> From the time when *Don Quixote* ‘first opened my eyes to an imaginative world outside myself, I had read hungrily’, Symons declared.<sup>26</sup> The seed was forever planted; it was Spanish literature that propelled Symons’ literary inclinations.

This quixotic, adventurous understanding of Spain accompanied him before he embarked upon his long-awaited first trip to the country. On 20 February 1891, Symons wrote to his friend Katherine Willard to tell her of his plans to tour the Continent with his close friend, the writer and sexologist Havelock Ellis (1859–1939) in the spring, expecting to be in Barcelona by 1 May:

When there is to be a great Socialist demonstration — perhaps a revolution — at all events a big row! You will read perhaps in the papers that the rebels were led by two young Englishmen mounted on mules, who gave eloquent speeches in excellent English. Then you will read that we were thrown into prison, endured great sufferings, & finally escaped through the devotion of a young

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<sup>23</sup> Arthur Symons, *Spiritual Adventures*, (London: Archibald Constable, 1905), p. 14.

<sup>24</sup> Symons, *Spiritual Adventures*, p. 14.

<sup>25</sup> Symons, *Spiritual Adventures*, pp. 14–15.

<sup>26</sup> Symons, *Spiritual Adventures*, p. 26.

Gipsy (you know I take a great interest in the Gipsies, & know their language a little). So look out for stirring events.<sup>27</sup>

Although Symons' quixotic flight of fancy did not come to pass, Spain held a profound effect on both men. Indeed, the impact was so great that they proposed collaborating on a book on the country. The book was never written, but Ellis did write his own book, *The Soul of Spain* (1908) and Symons, after he had recuperated somewhat from his breakdown, collected a number of articles he had written earlier to form 'Spain' in *Cities and Sea-Coasts and Islands*, as mentioned above. On that first trip, they visited the northern cities of Barcelona, Zaragoza and Burgos, as well as central Madrid. Symons already felt a kind of novelty in a country which would trigger and accompany his artistic evolution over the next decade:

In Spain we felt we had broken ground, & mean to go again & visit the really Spanish Spain of the South. We only stayed at Barcelona, Zaragoza, Madrid & Burgos, so we have much to see. But the whole affair was very new & inspiring ... It inspired some ten little 'Silhouettes' while I was there, & is now inspiring some prose articles which I am trying to do at once, while the subject is fresh in my mind.<sup>28</sup>

The only Spanish piece that Symons published immediately afterwards was the poem 'At Burgos', included in *Silhouettes* (1892). This short piece (two quatrains) represents a fine example of Symons' experimentation with impressionistic verse, his main preoccupation at the time. 'At Burgos' focuses exclusively upon the most prominent image in the northern Spanish city, the cathedral. Symons combines a non-discursive, rhythmic style, with clarity and precision of imagery: 'Miraculous silver-

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<sup>27</sup> Arthur Symons to Katherine Willard, 20 February 1891, Mrs Summerfield Baldwin III Collection, quoted in Beckson, *Arthur Symons: A Life*, p. 66.

<sup>28</sup> Arthur Symons to Dykes Campbell, 12 May [1891], Buckingham, British Library, Add. MS 49523, fol.193.

work in stone / Against the blue miraculous skies'.<sup>29</sup> The repetition of words like 'miraculous', and 'wings' later on, together with the toll of the bells — 'High up, the lyric belfry sings' — contribute to recreate a rhythmic, musical effect, an Impressionist melding of artistic media within the poem's verbal texture. In this poem Symons is primarily concerned with describing external nature, 'flashing' upon the reader in a 'new, sudden way so exact an image of what [the reader has] just seen, just as [the reader has] seen it', as he would himself describe in 'The Decadent Movement in Literature' when writing about Impressionist literature.<sup>30</sup>

In his much later volume, *Lesbia* (1920), Symons included a section revealingly entitled 'Silhouettes' — dedicated to his Spanish friend José María de Elizondo — with another six pieces on Spain. The date of publication is quite misleading, since Symons conceived all of these pieces in that first trip to Spain in 1891, and all of them deal with his artistic concerns of the late 1880s and early 1890s.<sup>31</sup> In the poem 'Barcelona', for example, Symons attempts to recreate an Impressionist painting in verse, by the overuse of strokes of colour — he uses fourteen colour adjectives in four four-lines stanzas — and the recreation of four different scenes per stanza:

The white and brown of fifty masts  
Chequer the depths of blue below,  
Where in the harbour, to and fro,  
The little white sails go.

[...]

Far as to where the mountains meet  
The sky that gently silvers down  
The roofs and windows of the town

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<sup>29</sup> Arthur Symons, *Silhouettes* (London: Elkin Mathews and John Lane, 1892), p. 87.

<sup>30</sup> Symons, 'The Decadent Movement in Literature', p. 859.

<sup>31</sup> After Symons' breakdown in 1908, this was indeed a common practice; he would constantly reuse material to publish.

Swarm grey and white and brown.<sup>32</sup>

Symons is here, again, attempting to follow his own precepts on impressionistic writing: ‘in an impressionistic art concerned, as the art of painting is, with the revelation, the re-creation, of a colored and harmonious world, which (they tell us) owes its very existence to the eyes which see it, truth is a quality which can be attained only by him who seeks beauty before truth.’<sup>33</sup> The soft palette of white, brown, blue and grey, used repeatedly in three out of four stanzas to describe the calmness of the landscape, contrasts with the appearance of the colours red and black in a single stanza:

A mule mounts slowly up the hill,  
A red-capped peasant, half-asleep,  
Nods on his back; the small black sheep  
In slow procession creep.<sup>34</sup>

The tranquillity of the Spanish landscape contrasts with the ‘red-fiery’ Spanish nature, that stands out even when ‘half-asleep’. In a similar vein, in the poem ‘Madrid’ Symons chooses a particular scene to represent the city. He does not attempt to describe Madrid as a whole, but to recreate a part of it that embodies the feelings it evokes:

A beggar smoking a cigar,  
Here at the corner of the street,  
Strums feebly on an old guitar.<sup>35</sup>

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<sup>32</sup> Arthur Symons, ‘Barcelona’, *Lesbia and Other Poems* (New York: E. P. Dutton, 1920), p. 118.

<sup>33</sup> Symons, *Dramatis Personae*, p. 343.

<sup>34</sup> Symons, ‘Barcelona’, p. 118.

<sup>35</sup> Arthur Symons, ‘Madrid’, *Lesbia and Other Poems* (New York: E. P. Dutton, 1920), p. 120.

A beggar playing a guitar becomes then metonymic for the city, which, at the same time, embodies the paradoxical Spanish nature: ‘half sad, half sweet’, with an ‘air of laughter and of cries.’<sup>36</sup> Symons uses an almost identical technique in the poem ‘In the Prado’, in which he focuses on the figure of a Spanish woman visiting the museum. By doing so, he offers an ‘impression’ of his feelings after visiting the place, rather than an accurate description of the place itself. Yet again, the figure of the Spanish woman serves Symons to offer a general impression of the country as a whole:

Her body’s rhythm, and the gleam  
Her eyes are lit with — this is Spain!<sup>37</sup>

If the scene of the beggar in Madrid focuses on the melancholy happiness of Spain that Symons admires, his impression of the Prado serves to present his own obsession with Spanish dancing and rhythm — that will be explored in the second section of this chapter — as well as a universal Decadent obsession with the figure of the mysterious, enchanting woman:

The black mantilla drapes with grace  
The lustrous blackness of her hair,  
And to the pallor of her face  
Gives that bewitching air.<sup>38</sup>

Based on Symons’ impressions of the main Spanish cities, Barcelona and Madrid, one could easily assume that, for Symons, Spanish urban areas altogether lacked modernity; peasants are evoked to describe Barcelona and beggars and traditional women in black *mantillas* to describe Madrid. We need to look at his later prose to

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<sup>36</sup> Symons, ‘Madrid’, p. 120.

<sup>37</sup> Arthur Symons, ‘In the Prado’, *Lesbia and Other Poems* (New York: E. P. Dutton, 1920), p. 121.

<sup>38</sup> Symons, ‘In the Prado’, p. 121.



discover a more complex picture: contemporary modernity on one hand, and primitiveness that speaks of modernity on the other.

Symons returned to Spain in early October 1898, and stayed there until April 1899. Once more, he began his trip in the north-east on his way back from France, but this time he visited Montserrat and Tarragona. He then continued south to Valencia and Alicante on his way to the southern region of Andalucía, where he stayed in Sevilla, Málaga, Córdoba and Cádiz. In Málaga, he met again Havelock Ellis, and this time also his wife, the writer and women's rights activist, Edith Ellis (1861–1916). Symons finished his journey in Madrid, and visited the Castilian, and mystical, cities of Toledo and Ávila. At the end of this trip he wrote:

I am writing these lines in Madrid, to which I have come suddenly, after a long quiet in Andalusia; and I feel already a new pulse in my blood, a keener consciousness of life, and a sharper human curiosity. Even in Seville I knew that I should see to-morrow, in the same streets, hardly changed since the Middle Ages, the same people that I had seen to-day. But here there are new possibilities, all the exciting accidents of the modern world, of a population always changing, of a city into which civilisation has brought all its unrest. And as I walk in these broad, windy streets and see these people, whom I hardly recognise for Spaniards, so awake and so hybrid are they, I have felt the sense of Balzac coming back into my veins. At Cordova [*sic*] he was unthinkable; at Cadiz I could realise only his large, universal outlines, vague as the murmur of the sea; here I feel him, he speaks the language I am talking, he sums up the life in whose midst I find myself. For Balzac is the equivalent of great cities.<sup>39</sup>

The 'lines' that Symons alludes to would eventually become part of his most celebrated piece of work: *The Symbolist Movement in Literature*. This extract reveals the contrast between the 'universal' elementality that Symons observed in some Spanish cities and the modernity he perceived in others, like Madrid — a modernity

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<sup>39</sup> Arthur Symons, 'Balzac', *Fortnightly Review*, May 1899, p. 755. Symons would include this essay in the 1919 edition of *The Symbolist Movement in Literature*.

that is altogether banished from his earlier verse. More importantly, it also testifies to the crucial role his second Spanish trip played in his articulation of Symbolism. Between his first visit to Spain in 1891 and his second one in 1898, Symons had been developing his own aesthetics and attempting to fully articulate his Symbolist ideas. Symons was then trying to distance himself from Decadence — which had acquired undesirable connotations especially after Oscar Wilde's trials in 1895 — while essentially holding on to its aesthetic principles. Symons captured this second visit to the country in verse in his volume *Images of Good and Evil* (1899) and in prose in several articles. It is in these works in which we can glimpse a clear switch from Impressionism to Symbolism as Symons understood them. Karl Beckson has noted how in *Images of Good and Evil* there is 'a decided advance over his preceding verse', with 'richer symbolic soundings'.<sup>40</sup> As opposed to his Spanish 'silhouettes', where Symons was mainly concerned with describing the external world, in this volume the focus is on interiority. The seven months that he spent in Spanish soil were decisive in this aesthetic evolution.

For Symons, the Impressionist artist, in literature as in painting, 'would flash upon you in a new, sudden way' an 'exact' image of 'what you have just seen', while the Symbolist, again 'in this new, sudden way, would flash upon you the "soul" of that which can be apprehended only by the soul'.<sup>41</sup> If the Spanish 'silhouettes' written in 1891 reveal visual strokes of places and characters, the verse written during his second Spanish trip attempts to evoke the state of his mind, of his soul, rather than offering detached 'images'. Symons does not offer particular scenes of Spanish life anymore, but almost mystical accounts of the emotions stimulated by Spanish places. In these

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<sup>40</sup> Beckson, *Arthur Symons: A Life*, p. 202.

<sup>41</sup> Symons, 'The Decadent Movement in Literature,' p. 859.

poems the pronoun 'I' multiplies in a refracted interiority that constantly references the 'soul'.

Symons began his second Spanish trip in October 1898 in the monastery of Montserrat — located in a mountain range to the north-west of Barcelona. In medieval legends and mythology, the mountain is thought to be Montsalvat, the site of the castle of the Holy Grail, as depicted by Wagner in *Parsifal* (1882). While there, Symons wrote a poem expressing the inner calm and mystical sensations that the setting had evoked:

Peace waits among the hills;  
 I have drunk peace,  
 Here, where the blue air fills  
 The great cup of the hills,  
 And fills with peace.

Between the earth and the sky,  
 I have seen the earth  
 Like a dark cloud go by,  
 And fade out of the sky;  
 There was no more earth.

Here, where the Holy Graal  
 Brought secret light  
 Once, from beyond the veil,  
 I, seeing no Holy Graal,  
 See divine light.<sup>42</sup>

Symons does not offer a particular image of Montserrat here, but a full array of the sensations that the place emanates for a revealing 'I', embodiment of both the writer and the reader, or the observer and the observed. It is now when we begin to note a more complicated relationship to the country: a complexity of relation expressed by a less secure subject/object distinction. The detached imagistic sketches yield to a new

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<sup>42</sup> Arthur Symons, 'Montserrat', *Images of Good and Evil* (London: William Heinemann, 1899), p. 134 [emphasis mine].

proliferation of the lyric 'I' and to a more prominent poet/observer. Spain cannot be encapsulated in diffuse images, or impressions, anymore. It demands a fuller and more complex understanding. In his essay on Montserrat (1898, 1918) Symons also suggested the impossibility of capturing the place in one single image: 'But the beauty of Montserrat lies in no detail, can be explained by no analysis: it is the beauty of a conscious soul, exquisite, heroic, sacred, ancient, in the midst of the immemorable peace, dignity, and endurance of high mountains.'<sup>43</sup> He thus tried to record again, this time in prose, the inner experience that the mountain and monastery had awoken:

Like one not yet awakened from a dream I seemed to myself while I was still in Montserrat; and now, having left it, I seem to have awakened from the dream. One of those few exquisite, impossible places which exist, properly, only in our recollection of them, Montserrat is still that place of refuge which our dreams are; and is it not itself a dream of the Middle Ages, Monsalvat, the castle of the Holy Graal, which men have believed to be not in the world, and to contain something not of the world, seeing it poised so near heaven, among so nearly inaccessible rocks, in the lonely hollow of a great plain?<sup>44</sup>

Beckson notes that 'in some mysterious way', Symons evoked in this essay 'the suggestive imagery of a Symbolist poem'.<sup>45</sup> He had arranged to secure permission from the Benedictines to stay at the monastery for a time longer than that usually permitted to visitors. Yet he decided to leave in three days — 'evoking the symbolic re-enactment of resurrection' — for he had had an extraordinary experience that he did not wish to undermine.<sup>46</sup> He had been 'moved to astonishment' and had formed a 'new kind of sentiment' that he had 'never felt before.'<sup>47</sup> For once, Symons wrote, 'I

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<sup>43</sup> Arthur Symons, 'Montserrat', *Cities and Sea-Coasts and Islands* (London: W. Collins, 1918), p. 124. This essay was first published on 5 November 1898 in the *Saturday Review*, and then reprinted in *Cities and Sea-Coasts and Islands*.

<sup>44</sup> Symons, 'Montserrat', *Cities and Sea-Coasts and Islands*, p. 122.

<sup>45</sup> Beckson, *Arthur Symons: A Life*, p. 179.

<sup>46</sup> Beckson, *Arthur Symons: A Life*, p. 179.

<sup>47</sup> Symons, 'Montserrat', *Cities and Sea-Coasts and Islands*, p. 125.

was perfectly happy, and with that element of strangeness in my happiness without which I cannot conceive happiness.’<sup>48</sup> Such an experience, he believed, if ‘continued indefinitely’, would lose its ‘supremacy, which exists only by contrast.’ By leaving at the ‘moment of perfection’, he would preserve that incomparable memory, which, as he wrote, would ‘always rise for me, out of the plain of ordinary days, like the mountain itself, Monsalvat, where I had perhaps seen the Holy Graal.’<sup>49</sup> The combination of sublime mountain, Catholic monastery, and mythical Grail had resulted in a spiritual awakening, in a new sensorial and transcendental experience. The Spanish place urged a ‘new kind of sentiment’ which, revealingly, Symons ‘had never felt before’. French Symbolism was then beginning to materialise for Symons through the Spanish *genius loci*, and through a very peculiar Spanish devotion and mystical transcendence — an aspect that will be fully explored in my next and last chapter on Decadent Catholicism and Spanish mysticism.

Indeed, Symons’ reception of Montserrat links Vernon Lee and Oscar Wilde’s Decadent Aestheticism with Symbolist mysticism, offering a prominent chronological milestone in the Decadent reception of Spain as a whole. Symbolists were ultimately concerned with mysticism, for their poetry protested against an age of materialism which had lost its belief in traditional religion; and it was the Symbolists’ concern to find an effective substitute in interior experience. Symbolists rebutted scientific realism in their preference for an ideal world, which was, for them, more real, ‘a religion of Ideal beauty’, to quote C.M. Bowra.<sup>50</sup> When Symons wrote about Montserrat that ‘in all this there is nothing trivial, for here the grotesque becomes for once a new, powerful kind of beauty’, he was reproducing Lee and Wilde’s aesthetic

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<sup>48</sup> Symons, ‘Montserrat’, *Cities and Sea-Coasts and Islands*, p. 125.

<sup>49</sup> Symons, ‘Montserrat’, *Cities and Sea-Coasts and Islands*, pp. 125–26.

<sup>50</sup> Cecil Maurice Bowra, *The Heritage of Symbolism* (London: Macmillan, 1943), p. 3.

vision of Velázquez's paintings — and other aspects of Spanish culture — as grotesque yet beautiful works of art.<sup>51</sup>

This position in-between Aestheticism, Decadence and Symbolism can also be traced in Symons' pieces on Tarragona, the next place he visited after Montserrat. In his essay 'Tarragona' (1899, 1918) he replicates Lee's Aesthetic *genius loci*: 'in that coolness under the sunshine visible upon the foliage, is to surrender oneself to an enchanted peace. Here Tarragona at least still sleeps perfectly, in that permanent dream of the Middle Ages.'<sup>52</sup> Yet the glorious decay of Decadence is also a constant presence, for 'all Tarragona is expressed in those two words, ruins and the sea.'<sup>53</sup> Symons delights in this essay in a Decadent tendency towards masochism and self-inflicted suffering, and in his own preoccupation with prisons and chains. In the conclusion of his essay on the city, Symons writes how Tarragona's prison, located below a cliff near the sea, evokes, as Beckson highlights, 'an obsessive concern with sin and punishment': 'for every one who looks at the sea there is the prison thrusting itself between one's sight and the sea, more desolate than any ruin, a wicked spot which one cannot wipe off from the earth.'<sup>54</sup> Similarly, his poem 'At Tarragona' (1899) offers an obsessive self-reflection on sin, guilt and death, with a compulsive use of the lyric 'I':

If **I** could know but when and why  
This piece of thoughtless dust  
begins  
To think, and straightway **I am I**,  
And these bright hopes and these brave  
sins,  
[...]

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<sup>51</sup> Symons, 'Montserrat', *Cities and Sea-Coasts and Islands*, p. 123.

<sup>52</sup> Symons, 'Tarragona', *Cities and Sea-Coasts and Islands*, p. 116.

<sup>53</sup> Symons, 'Tarragona', *Cities and Sea-Coasts and Islands*, p. 114.

<sup>54</sup> Beckson, *Arthur Symons: A Life*, p. 179; Symons, 'Tarragona', *Cities and Sea-Coasts and Islands*, p. 118.

Why, thus unwilling, **I** rejoice,  
 And will the good **I** do not do,  
 [...]  
 Nor why **I** seek **I** know not what,  
**I** bear this heavy, separate name  
 [...]  
 While **I**, that count **my** days and nights,  
 Fear thought in life, and life in death.<sup>55</sup>

The pathos of this poem connects Symons with Lee's and Wilde's fascination with the idea of Black Spain — already discussed in the first and second chapter of this thesis — but Symons stretches it further, embracing that concept himself. As opposed to Lee, who looked with disgust at Spanish grief, and to Wilde, who used the darkness of Spain as an inspirational tool for his work, Symons feels the grief and the pain as his own. Black Spain serves Symons not only to inspire his writing, but to comprehend his own demons. In doing so, he strives to write Symbolist poetry; he moves from the painterly Impressionist 'eye' to the subjective interiority of the 'I'. In the poem 'Tarragona', the speaker recognises indeed something that at other times he might not have been so excruciatingly aware of; in a moment of truth, he sees, as Symons wrote in 'The Decadent Movement in Literature', 'the deeper meaning of things evident.'<sup>56</sup> In other words, 'Tarragona', in Symons' understanding of the term, is a Symbolist poem. Symons' experiences in Montserrat and Tarragona, usually neglected by critics, are revealed, then, as pivotal for his work of the late 1890s.

Symons also reproduced Lee's and Wilde's Spanish darkness in his next stop during his 1898–1899 trip, Valencia. The result of that visit was the essay 'Valencia' (1899, 1918) in which he tried to capture the dark tonalities, street urchins and beggars of the Spanish Baroque painter Bartolomé Esteban Murillo (1617–1682):

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<sup>55</sup> Arthur Symons, 'At Tarragona', *Images of Good and Evil* (London: William Heinemann, 1899), pp. 135–36 [emphasis mine].

<sup>56</sup> Symons, 'The Decadent Movement in Literature', p. 859.

There are whole streets of shops, every shop with its little oval signboard, painted with the image of a saint; [...] And, stagnant amidst the constant flowing of busy life, to and fro in these vivid, narrow streets, a beggar stands at every crossing; men with a horrible absence of hands, men without legs, men doubled up, and twisted into strange shapes, hopping like frogs, blind men, men sitting against the wall with cloaks drawn over their faces, old men tottering with age, women carrying sick children, or with children running beside them with little tin plates in their hands.<sup>57</sup>

It is in passages such as this that we discern how the real attraction for Symons rested on the extreme contrasts of Spain: next to the scenes of indigeneity we envisage shimmering brightness, riveting colours. ‘And the colour!’ wrote an amused Symons, ‘I have never seen so much colour in any streets before [...] it is bright, moving.’<sup>58</sup>

He continued describing the never-ending contrasts of Spain: ‘every one, as people do in Spain, is hurrying leisurely; they are at once serious and good-humoured, as Spanish people are. And this coloured crowd is moving [...] before the barbaric rococo of the Church of Los Santos Juanes, in the one spacious square of Valencia, where, in the days of the Cid, tournaments were held, and men had been burned alive.’<sup>59</sup> The result was thus that of a city ‘both old and new’, and much in it ‘seem[ed] to be at once old and new’.<sup>60</sup>

This living on of the Middle Ages, in a busy town, into the present, came home to me with singular force one Thursday morning as I went to the Cathedral Square to see the Tribunal of the Waters [...] At half-past eleven six old men, peasants, took their seats, bare-headed, in their peasants’ blouses. Then two peasants came forward, entered the enclosure, and each stated his case briefly. The case was heard, discussed, and decided in five minutes. [...] This tribunal, which, since the time of the Moors, has sat here every Thursday at half-past eleven to decide all questions relating to the watering of the lands, is a remnant

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<sup>57</sup> Arthur Symons, ‘Valencia’, *Cities and Sea-Coasts and Islands* (London: W. Collins, 1918), pp. 106–07. This essay was first published on 14 January 1899 in the *Saturday Review*, and then reprinted in *Cities and Sea-Coasts and Islands*.

<sup>58</sup> Symons, ‘Valencia’, p. 107.

<sup>59</sup> Symons, ‘Valencia’, p. 108.

<sup>60</sup> Symons, ‘Valencia’, p. 107.



of mediaeval democracy, peasants judging peasants, which is not the least surprising of popular survivals. Another morning I seemed to myself more than ever in the Middle Ages, as I attended a Latin discussion in the Cathedral.<sup>61</sup>

For Symons, the experiential contrast of past and modernity — ‘this living on of the Middle Ages, in a busy town, into the present’ — was the real lure of Spain.

These Spanish contrasts appeared even more visibly for Symons when he witnessed a bullfight at Valencia. Bullfighting, as Symons described it, is a mixture of rapture and cruelty: a transgressive experience of perverse pleasure that he would fully assimilate. On 11 November 1898, Symons recounted to W.B. Yeats that he had been to a bullfight and had penned ‘a *horrible* description of it, theorizing [on] the universal instinct of cruelty, and confessing my own share [in] it.’<sup>62</sup> As a result of that experience, he would write the essay ‘A Bull Fight at Valencia’ (1899, 1918). Symons sat in the second row of boxes at the *Plaza de Toros*, or bullring, for two hours and a half, and witnessed the ‘Massacre of the Horses’ and the killing of eight bulls.

In his brutal and explicit descriptions, he exhibited his awe for ‘that red plunge of horns into the living flesh, that living body ripped and lifted and rolled to the ground, that monstrous visible agony dragging itself about the sand’.<sup>63</sup> Symons repeatedly reflected the violence/pleasure dichotomy he saw around him and experienced within himself, becoming nearly paralysed in ecstasy and terror: ‘The bull has tasted blood, he is still untired, and but slightly wounded. Little shouts of delight went through the house, and I could not but join in the applause’.<sup>64</sup> Symons’ writing reveals a country dominated by an intense sense of excitement and suffering. The idea of Spanish people being distinguished by a natural acceptance of death also pervades

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<sup>61</sup> Symons, ‘Valencia’, pp. 108–09.

<sup>62</sup> Symons, *Arthur Symons: Selected Letters*, p. 126.

<sup>63</sup> Symons, ‘A Bull Fight at Valencia’, p. 137.

<sup>64</sup> Symons, ‘A Bull Fight at Valencia’, p. 134.

much of his descriptions. This openness is understood by Symons with a certain ambiguity: on the one hand there is cruelty, but also a positive authenticity toward the understanding of life. As Bataille would observe about 1920s Spain, Symons' vision of Spanish bullfighting as a celebration of life and death, of pleasure and cruelty, recognises artistic expression at the extreme limits of experience.

The structural dichotomy that is produced by these Spanish extremes — the necessity to maintain these opposite poles for artistic and experiential possibility — is directly connected to Symons' articulation of Symbolism. In the conclusion to *The Symbolist Movement* (1899) Symons makes the final assertion that Symbolist literature reconciles man more readily with death: 'All we have to ask of death is: what is life?' and accept the 'theory of life which makes us familiar with mystery, and which seems to harmonise those instincts which make for religion, passion, and art, freeing us at once of a great bondage.'<sup>65</sup> These remarks recall Symons' fascination with that mysterious, even transgressive blending of life and death that he finds in Spanish daily life and popular culture, and which for him is intertwined with notions of Symbolist mysticism.

Symons concluded his essay on the city of Valencia with a description of a sunset in a stormy sky over the river:

The thin stream was coloured a deep purple, where the reflection of the clouds fell right upon it; and higher up, where a foot-bridge crossed the river, reversed shadows walked in greenish water, step for step with the passers on the bridge. It was long before the light faded out of the clouds, which sank to a paler and paler yellow; and I stood there thrilled with admiration of those violent and daring harmonies, which seemed to carry Nature beyond her usual scheme of colour, in what I could not help almost hearing as the surge of a Wagnerian orchestra.<sup>66</sup>

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<sup>65</sup> Arthur Symons, *The Symbolist Movement in Literature* (London: William Heinemann, 1899), pp. 173–74.

<sup>66</sup> Symons, 'Valencia', p. 113.

Valencia, the ‘old and new’ city where violence and pleasure coexist, suggests colour and musical harmonies, recalling the synaesthesia of the Symbolists. Indeed, the evocation of a Wagnerian finale — similar to the ending of his Montserrat essay — suggests that Symons, as Beckson notes, was attempting Symbolist travel writing for the first time.<sup>67</sup> Stimulated by the Spanish culture of extremes that he perceived, and by a mysterious spirituality of place, Symons would replicate this Symbolist musical technique in other essays on Spanish cities. Continuing his journey further south, he wrote, for example, of the Andalusian city of Cádiz, with its

grey waves heaving up and down with the long roll of the Atlantic. They were white at the edge, where they pushed hard at the wall, and sank back, and pushed hard at it again. A chill wind blew across them, with a dreary and melancholy sound.<sup>68</sup>

In fact, Spain and Symons’ articulation of Symbolism appear persistently intertwined in Andalusia in the last months of 1898. On 29 November, Symons wrote to Yeats from Seville that he was ‘copying, and touching up’, his essay on the Symbolist writer Auguste Villiers de l’Isle-Adam (1838–1889) for the *Fortnightly Review*, an essay later incorporated into *The Symbolist Movement in Literature*.<sup>69</sup> Meanwhile, he added in that letter and in others he sent to Yeats from Spain, he was studying Spanish music, literature, painting and architecture, and translating Spanish poetry, the notes on which were turned into a series of essays written and published over the next four years. Some of the topics of these articles included the poetry of contemporary authors such

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<sup>67</sup> Beckson, *Arthur Symons: A Life*, p. 180.

<sup>68</sup> Arthur Symons, ‘Cadiz’, *Cities and Sea-Coasts and Islands* (London: W. Collins, 1918), p. 130. This essay was written in 1899, but first published on 19 July 1902 in the *Saturday Review*, and then reprinted in *Cities and Sea-Coasts and Islands*.

<sup>69</sup> Symons, *Arthur Symons: Selected Letters*, p. 128.

as Ramón de Campoamor (1817–1901) and Gaspar Núñez de Arce (1834–1903), the seventeenth-century mystics Santa Teresa and San Juan de la Cruz, the sixteenth and seventeenth-century painters of Seville, and the painter El Greco (1541–1614) in Toledo, the ‘Dead City’ he ‘loved best in Europe’ alongside the French Arles.<sup>70</sup> Of the Spanish painters of the Golden Age, he wrote of their ‘mystical absorption in the divine life’, reinforcing his renewed preoccupation with mysticism at the time he was preparing his Symbolist book, an aspect that will be fully explored in the fourth and final chapter of this thesis.<sup>71</sup> Symons also told Yeats that he had just translated ‘a lovely song’ from the Spanish Golden Age dramatist Pedro Calderón de la Barca’s *La vida es sueño* (*Life is a Dream*) (1635) as well as

two or three poignant little pieces from a modern man, Gustavo [Adolfo] Becquer [1836–1870], who died in 1870, at the age of 34, and whose work I am reading with great interest. His verses are the best things that have ever been done in the Heine style, and his prose stories are often of a wonderfully poetical fantasy — some of them very like your ‘Secret Rose’ [1897], more macabre, less philosophical, just as romantic.<sup>72</sup>

While immersed in Spanish painting and literature, Symons continued to write his *Symbolist Movement in Literature*. From Málaga, where he stayed in January 1899, he kept Yeats abreast of his progress on his Symbolist book, and added:

I should like to see you and talk over many things. Do be in London in the latter half of May. I have done the whole of my *Symbolist Movement* except the Introduction, which is difficult, and very important.<sup>73</sup>

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<sup>70</sup> ‘To Gabriele D’Annunzio, I dedicate this translation, begun at Arles and finished at Toledo, the two dead cities which I love most in Europe.’ Arthur Symons, ‘Dedication’ in Gabriele D’Annunzio, *The Dead City*, trans. by Arthur Symons (London: William Heinemann, 1900), unnumbered.

<sup>71</sup> Symons, ‘The Painters of Seville’, p. 25.

<sup>72</sup> Symons, *Arthur Symons: Selected Letters*, p. 126.

<sup>73</sup> Symons, *Arthur Symons: Selected Letters*, p. 129.

Symons had completed 'the whole' manuscript of his *Symbolist Movement* in Spain. This is no coincidence, no light remark. It credits Spain with a new, inspiring cultural presence in Symons' work. Whilst Symons often repeated Spanish clichés, inherited from both British and French Romantic and Victorian writers, he managed to extract something innovative and unique, suggesting new aesthetic practices in absorbing and reproducing Spain. As mentioned above, Symons recognised, and admired, the clash between old and new in Spain, although he sometimes found it difficult to portray the newness of Spain and opted instead for delving into its picturesque past. To Yeats, for example, he wrote on 11 November 1898:

Here, in how different a world, I am often finding myself back in the Middle Ages. Did I tell you of the 'Tribunal of the Waters', when the peasants meet outside the Cathedral door to decide their differences in regard to the watering of the lands: six of them, chosen by themselves, and with their own president, sit on a divan in the open street, inside a temporary railing, and decide all cases: the pleading and the judgment take 5 or 10 minutes, and the judgment holds good as law. This has taken place every Thursday at 11.30 since the time of the Moors, that is, for about five centuries. Then the other day I attended a Latin disputation in the Cathedral. It seemed as if nothing had been changed since the days of Abelard.<sup>74</sup>

This backward representation of Spain, half realistic, half Romantic, in which Symons so often indulges, inevitably leads to the Oriental past of Spain. The further south Symons travels, the more he dreams of an unachievable and far-flung Orient. Describing the landscape around the Turia, the river of Valencia, he 'seems to see Africa, the desert and the oasis.'<sup>75</sup> When he arrives in Andalusia, this sensation of being in a kind of liminal space between East and West explodes. The faces of Andalusian women are 'full of sun and shadow, often with a rich colour between

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<sup>74</sup> Symons, *Arthur Symons: Selected Letters*, p. 126.

<sup>75</sup> Symons, 'Valencia', p. 112.

Eastern and Western, and with the languor and keenness of both races.’<sup>76</sup> While in Cádiz, waiting for a summons that never came to cross over to Tangier, he ‘wanted to be on the other side of it, under the African sun [...] I was impatient at being still in Europe.’<sup>77</sup> He is thus acknowledging the European side of Spain that remains, however, always in the margins, forever captive between two worlds: East and West, old and new. Havelock Ellis, Symons’ companion for the most part of his Spanish travels, also viewed the Spanish man as ‘the child of a European father by an Abyssinian mother’ and as serving as an important ‘connecting link between Europe and the African continent it was once attached to and still so nearly adjoins.’<sup>78</sup> Equally, for Symons Seville has ‘the theatres, cafés, shops, of a real city’, and yet ‘is full of the romantic spirit, the oriental touch freeing it from any of the too heaving solemnity of the Middle Ages.’<sup>79</sup> In Spain, Symons is always trapped at a threshold, in the same dichotomies and paradoxes that trapped him as Decadent, and Symbolist author.

Symons acknowledges the *current* modernity of Spain, but he tends to focus on its past as something unique. This past is, however, paradoxically connected to modernity. The Spanish art of the Golden Age, for example, is for Symons and for many other *fin-de-siècle* authors — as seen in the second chapter of this thesis with Velázquez — associated with the more modern schools of painting which opposed the high finish of traditional Victorian art. Symons also sees in Toledo the Greek-born painter of the Spanish Renaissance El Greco as discovering the world anew:

Theotocopuli seems to have discovered art over again for himself, and in a way which will suggest their varying ways to some of the most typical modern painters. And, indeed, I think he did discover his art over again from the beginning, setting himself to the problem of the representation of life and

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<sup>76</sup> Symons, ‘Seville’, pp. 15–16.

<sup>77</sup> Symons, ‘Cadiz’, p. 130.

<sup>78</sup> Ellis, *The Soul of Spain* (1908), p. 29.

<sup>79</sup> Symons, ‘Seville’, p. 3, p. 11.

vision, of the real world and the spiritual world, as if no one had ever painted before.<sup>80</sup>

In the same vein, the Romantic painter Francisco Goya (1746–1828), whose work Symons discovered in the Prado Museum in Madrid, had in him ‘a ferocious genius, essentially macabre, malignant, diabolical, stupendous as his intense scope of vision; [...] dramatic [...] in that elemental [sense] which conjures up incredible abysses over unseen depths, that draws one into a positive enchantment’.<sup>81</sup> A notion of ‘elementality’, even of primitiveness, appears constantly intertwined with a sense of novelty, in Spanish places and in Spanish culture.

Notwithstanding Symons’ admiration for the Spanish old masters and for Spanish Golden Age literature, he deemed contemporary Spanish high culture more difficult to appreciate. He wrote articles and reviews on the aforementioned Núñez de Arce, on Juan Valera (1824–1905) and on José Echegaray (1832–1916) — co-winner of the Nobel Prize in Literature in 1904, with whom Symons arranged a meeting in Madrid in 1899 — all of them authors that he valued but considered old fashioned and prosaic overall.<sup>82</sup>

There were, however, two noticeable exceptions: the poet Campoamor, and the violinist Pablo Sarasate (1844–1908). His esteem for these two artists was rooted in the same principles that led him to treasure the old masters: a primitive ‘elementality’ attached to modernity. Symons compared Campoamor with Verlaine and highlighted that ‘he followed, long before Verlaine, Verlaine’s advice to “take

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<sup>80</sup> Arthur Symons, ‘Domenico Theotocopuli: A Study at Toledo’, *Cities and Sea-Coasts and Islands* (London: W. Collins, 1918), p. 50. This essay was written in 1899, but first published in March 1901 in the *Monthly Review*, and then reprinted in *Cities and Sea-Coasts and Islands*.

<sup>81</sup> Arthur Symons, ‘Goya, Spanish of the Spaniards’, *Vanity Fair*, March 1917, p. 43.

<sup>82</sup> Beckson, *Arthur Symons: A Life*, p. 182.

rhetoric and wring its neck.”<sup>83</sup> In *The Symbolist Movement*, he revealingly wrote that he ‘saw some faint strivings that way in Spain, and the aged Spanish poet Campoamor has always fought on behalf of a “transcendental” art in which we should recognise much of what is most essential in the doctrine of Symbolism.’<sup>84</sup>

In a similar vein, but in music, the violinist Sarasate possessed ‘the ennui of a disillusioned man of the world’ and yet ‘the amiability of a nature which has remained essentially childlike, the pride of a true Spaniard.’<sup>85</sup> Symons’ profound admiration for Sarasate was indeed embedded in an eternal condition which, he considered, all Symbolist and modern art should pursue:

Sarasate is essentially the representative of all that is novel and troubled in the modern world. No violin sings with so strange an acuteness, becomes so haunting a voice, so pathetic a lyrical cry — the cry of a modern soul. The bow strikes from the strings a shower of crystalline notes: they rain flashingly, a visible brilliance. The light becomes lightning, there is a storm among the strings, and the clear ascending tones broaden out into passionate, troubled chords. Suddenly a heavenly trill rises out of the tumult, like the voice of some more wonderful bird, a bird with a human soul. It rises, rises, until one almost seems to see the lark mounting into the sky, growing tinier against the blue. And then the strain changes, becomes more piercing, becomes almost an agony, as the magical bow seems to play a ghastly measure on strings made out of one’s very nerves.<sup>86</sup>

This agony that comes from within, the ‘novel and troubled’ aspects of the modern world, are constitutive parts of the aesthetics of extremes that Symons encountered in Spain. Like Montserrat and Tarragona, Sarasate’s music is ‘modern’ because it ‘appeals to us by its mysterious kinship with our vague distresses, its cry from we

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<sup>83</sup> Arthur Symons, ‘Campoamor’, *Cities and Sea-Coasts and Islands* (London: W. Collins, 1918), p. 82. This essay was first published in December 1901 in *Harper’s Monthly Magazine* as ‘Campoamor: The Great Spanish Poet of the Nineteenth Century’, and then reprinted in *Studies in Prose and Verse* (London: J.M. Dent, 1904) and in *Cities and Sea-Coasts and Islands*.

<sup>84</sup> Symons, *The Symbolist Movement in Literature* (1899), p. v.

<sup>85</sup> Symons, ‘Sarasate: An Appreciation’, p. 658.

<sup>86</sup> Symons, ‘Sarasate: An Appreciation’, p. 658.



know not whence, its cry for we know not what.’<sup>87</sup> In both the Spanish places and the high art he encountered during his travels, Symons reveals an ‘eternal condition’ and primitiveness bound up with modernity, a notion which reached its zenith with his discovery of Spanish popular culture. After this chronological exploration of Symons’ travels in Spain, this chapter thus tracks back to 1891 to pay particular attention to Symons’ reception of Spanish popular culture. In order to fully grasp that primitivist modernity that Symons discovered in Spain, an in-depth exploration of Symons’ response to flamenco art is necessary.

### **‘Inarticulate cries’: Symons as Flamenco Aficionado**

Symons’ deep fascination with the music of Sarasate was indeed associated with his own admiration for Spanish popular music: ‘Those fantastic dances, with their broken rhythm, their pizzicato effects, their bizarre alternations of tone, are not compositions made for our astonishment, but the real national dances, as one hears them in the south of Spain’, wrote Symons of Sarasate’s music.<sup>88</sup> Symons became in fact interested in Sarasate after returning from his first trip to Spain in 1891, when he became ‘fascinated’ with the flamenco art form.<sup>89</sup>

Much like Sarasate’s compositions, flamenco music ‘has never accepted order [...] it remains chaotic, elemental, a part of nature trying to speak’, wrote Symons.<sup>90</sup> The elemental condition and primitiveness of Spanish flamenco music play, again, a

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<sup>87</sup> Symons, ‘Sarasate: An Appreciation’, p. 658.

<sup>88</sup> Symons, ‘Sarasate: An Appreciation’, p. 658.

<sup>89</sup> In his unpublished 1920s *Notes on Spanish Dancers and Spanish Gypsies*, Symons recalled how his ‘fascination’ for flamenco began in Barcelona, in 1891, in the Alcázar Español, a Spanish music hall: ‘This fascination began, for me, in Barcelona, [...] in the Alcazar Espanol [*sic*].’ Arthur Symons, ‘Quadro Flammes’ in *Notes on Spanish Dancers and Spanish Gypsies*, 16 June 1920, Box 13 Folder 18, Arthur Symons Papers, Department of Rare Books and Special Collections, Princeton University Library, Princeton New Jersey, USA.

<sup>90</sup> Symons, ‘Moorish Secrets in Spain’, p. 103.

fundamental role in its modernity: ‘it is music before rhythm, music which comes down to us untouched by the invention of the modern scale, from an antiquity out of which plain-chant is a first step towards modern harmony.’<sup>91</sup> As I argue in this concluding section, Symons found in the — often problematic — primitiveness of Spanish flamenco the quintessence of art, the perfect representation of Symbolism in art that he was so intensely seeking in this period.

In order to explore Symons’ multifaceted and captivating relationship to flamenco in the 1890s, I focus here on specific critical and poetic texts of the period. In particular, I examine the articles ‘A Spanish Music-Hall’ (1892, 1918), ‘Moorish Secrets in Spain’ (1899, 1918) and ‘Seville’ (1901, 1918), and a few of his multiple reviews of Spanish dancers for the popular evening newspaper *The Star* in the 1890s. I also analyse the poems ‘To a Gitana Dancing’ and ‘Spain (To Josefa)’, included in *Images of Good and Evil* (1899). Before further developing my argument, however, I first need to frame Symons’ attraction to flamenco within the context of his artistic interests in the early 1890s.

Symons’ early interest in flamenco can be explained by the specific characteristics of this popular Spanish art form. Flamenco involves several artistic expressions: *cante* (song), *baile* (dance), *toque* (guitar music), *jaleo* (vocalizations), *palmas* (handclapping) and *pitos* (finger snapping).<sup>92</sup> Despite the diverse conjectures concerning its origin, consensus situates the early history and development of flamenco in the Spanish southern region of Andalusia, where Gypsies began to settle in the latter half of the fifteenth century and with whom flamenco is most strongly

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<sup>91</sup> Symons, ‘Moorish Secrets in Spain’, p. 102.

<sup>92</sup> Israel J. Katz, ‘Flamenco’, *Grove Music Online* (2001)  
<<https://doi.org/10.1093/gmo/9781561592630.article.09780>>.

associated.<sup>93</sup> Flamenco draws then from traditions several centuries old, but it was not until the first half of the nineteenth century that it emerged as a distinctive form of Andalusian art. As Peter Manuel notes, Andalusian music culture ‘was itself an eclectic entity, syncretizing the legacy of the Arabs, Berbers, Jews, Christians’ and Gypsies who cohabited for several centuries.<sup>94</sup> As a public, performing art, flamenco developed in the second half of the nineteenth century, with the appearance of the *café cantantes* or music-halls. Symons found then in flamenco an art form with all the elements that occupied his mind in the early 1890s: music-halls, dance, music, and Gypsies.

Symons’ interest in flamenco art was indeed rooted in his wider fascination with Gypsy culture. A member of the Gypsy Lore Society most of his life, Symons saw in the Gypsies the sense of freedom he sought in life and art, the impulse of a mysterious and symbolic aspect of reality, and his own ambition to identify with both. Many critics describe Symons’ interest in Gypsies as a patronising idealisation of certain aspects of Gypsy culture that simply inverted the essentialist taxonomies of earlier derogatory racial typologies around Gypsies. Indeed, Symons tends to repeat all of the nineteenth-century tropes of Orientalism and race, mysticism and ahistoricity surrounding the Gypsies. Deborah Epstein Nord has gone as far as to qualify Symons’ views on Gypsies as ‘repugnant’.<sup>95</sup> Other critics, such as Janet Lyon, however, offer alternative political readings, and, most importantly, add an aesthetic strand that needs to be considered in order to understand *fin-de-siècle*, and Modernist, Gypsophilia.

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<sup>93</sup> For more on the origins, history and style of flamenco see, for example, Angel Alvarez Caballero, *Historia del cante flamenco* (Madrid: Alianza Editorial, 1981); Manuel García Matos, *Sobre el Flamenco: Estudios y Notas* (Madrid: Cinterco, 1987); and Michelle Heffner Hayes, *Flamenco: Conflicting Histories of the Dance* (Jefferson: McFarland, 2009).

<sup>94</sup> Peter Manuel, ‘Flamenco in Focus: An Analysis of a Performance of Soleares’, in *Analytical Studies in World Music*, ed. by Michael Tenzer (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), pp. 92–93.

<sup>95</sup> Deborah Epstein Nord, *Gypsies and the British Imagination, 1807–1930* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2006), p. 137.

These opposing understandings of Symons' relationship to Gypsy culture would be replicated in his reception of flamenco, as we shall see later on.

Lyon underlines how Symons' views on Gypsies — most famously gathered in his essay 'In Praise of Gypsies' (1908) — albeit deficient as activist journalism, reflect 'an uncharacteristic awareness of the particularities of the Gypsy plight as a political event unfolding in a more general political plot'.<sup>96</sup> Symons wrote 'In Praise of Gypsies' amidst the impending passage of the Moveable Dwellings Bill, which aimed to register, regulate, and provide for the sanitary inspection of the vans and tents of British Gypsies and Travellers, and to mandate the education of their children. Lyon argues that the shift in representations of Gypsies during this period from 'hazy and inscrutable natural subjects to objects' of a discourse of legislation, prosecution, and control had 'concretely reifying effects both for Gypsy populations and within British narrations of nationhood.'<sup>97</sup>

Alongside this political reading, Lyon foregrounds an aesthetic component of *fin-de-siècle* and Modernist Gypsophilia: 'Gypsy culture, as construed and aesthetically reworked by Modernist *gadže* [non-Romani] like Arthur Symons [...] forms an eccentric bulwark against rationalist modernity, especially in the matrix of London'.<sup>98</sup> Thus, in some sense the circulating image of the Romanies' communal strangeness becomes, in bohemian subculture, 'a projected form of a self-authenticating community within the structures of modern disenchantment'.<sup>99</sup>

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<sup>96</sup> Janet Lyon, 'Gadže Modernism', *Modernism/Modernity*, 11 (2004), 517–538 (p. 524). Beckson also notes that in the months before his breakdown, Symons wrote two pieces which are unique in his oeuvre, precisely for their engagement with social issues: the essay 'In Praise of Gypsies' and the play *The Superwomen: A Farce*, a satire of suffrage activism. Beckson, *Arthur Symons: A Life*, pp. 250–51.

<sup>97</sup> Lyon, 'Gadže Modernism', p. 524.

<sup>98</sup> Janet Lyon, 'Sociability in the Metropole: Modernism's Bohemian Salons', *ELH*, 76:3 (2009), 687–711 (p. 704).

<sup>99</sup> Lyon, 'Sociability in the Metropole: Modernism's Bohemian Salons', p. 704.

Symons' reception of Spanish Gypsy flamenco would prove to be equally complex: both politically conservative and radical, but primarily a site of aesthetic investigation.

Symons' interest in flamenco is also framed within his increasing fascination with music-halls, dance and music. Symons' intellectual interest in the music-hall — he would be referred to as 'a scholar in music halls' by Yeats in 1892 — has served to further the perception of Decadence as a high art movement nonetheless linked to and interested in popular culture.<sup>100</sup> As Linda Dowling observes, there was a 'genuine contribution of the music-hall cult to the emergent modernistic aesthetic' and, in this emergence, 'Symons' part was crucial, and he fulfilled it largely because he found in the art of the music-hall a new model for poetic language, one that freed it from the paralyzing choice between Pater's Euphuism and shapeless colloquial speech.'<sup>101</sup> More crucially, Dowling highlights, 'Symons found a new expressive ideal in the music-hall's language of physical gesture, and specifically in the language of the dance.'<sup>102</sup> The pivotal contribution of Symons' fascination with music-halls and dance to the dawning Modernist aesthetic has thus been extensively studied.

What is insufficiently acknowledged, however, is that the first extensive theoretical statement on music-halls that Symons wrote was the travelogue 'A Spanish Music-Hall', published in 1892, a few months after coming back from his first trip to Spain. In the article, Symons describes his experience of a soiree in a Spanish music-hall, where he mainly witnessed flamenco acts. Symons foreshadows the cultural studies intellectual's concern with the popular in this essay, and he does it in Spain, and in Spanish. The music-hall intellectual is translated into a Spanish term; at the

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<sup>100</sup> 'Arthur Symons is a scholar in music halls as another man might be a Greek scholar or an authority on the age of Chaucer.' W.B. Yeats, 'The Rhymers' Club' [23 April 1892], *Letters to the New Island*, ed. by Horace Reynolds (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1934), p. 144.

<sup>101</sup> Dowling, p. 238.

<sup>102</sup> Dowling, p. 238.

beginning of the piece Symons described himself as an ‘*aficionado*, as a Spaniard would say, of music-halls.’<sup>103</sup> Symons was certainly a devotee of music-halls before going to Spain, but he only became professionally and intellectually committed to them after being in Spain and, I argue, coming into contact with its popular culture. The dates here are crucial: nine months after coming back from Spain, in February 1892, Symons became the critic of music hall and dance for the popular evening newspaper, *The Star*. He had first contributed to the newspaper in October 1891 with a short piece on music halls, four months after coming back from his first trip to Spain.

The Spanish Music-Hall that Symons referred to in his 1892 article was the Alcázar Español, located in the *Barrio Chino* or Red-Light district of Barcelona, the first Spanish city that Symons visited in 1891. From the beginning of his essay, there is evidence for a reading of Symons as an Orientalist and colonial tourist. The British dandy, seeking ‘the most characteristic place [he] could find’, ended up at a place that ordinary Barcelonans perceived as extraneous to their own reality, a quarter that had become ‘a sexual and folkloric theme park featuring a gypsy underworld of shady flamenco performers.’<sup>104</sup> And yet, the Decadent Symons was not seeking ordinary life, but uniqueness, artifice and exaggeration. His choice of place in this instance has to do more with his idea of Decadent cosmopolitanism than with an Orientalist lens.

Symons’ cosmopolitan Decadence is connected to the Decadent quest for ‘*la vérité vraie*, the very essence of truth’ that Symons described in ‘The Decadent Movement in Literature’ (1893); ‘the truth of appearance to the senses, of the visible world to the eyes that see it; and the truth of spiritual things to the spiritual vision’,

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<sup>103</sup> Arthur Symons, ‘A Spanish Music-Hall’, *Cities and Sea-Coasts and Islands* (London: W. Collins, 1918), p. 145. This essay was first published in May 1892 in the *Fortnightly Review*, and then reprinted in *Cities and Sea-Coasts and Islands*.

<sup>104</sup> Symons, ‘A Spanish Music-Hall’, p. 146; Joan Ramon Resina, *Barcelona’s Vocation of Modernity: Rise and Decline of an Urban Image* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2008), p. 100.

which he could only find in his own idea of what ‘true’ Spanishness meant.<sup>105</sup> Hence the constant allusions to the ‘Spanish’ character of things: he noted that ‘the overture sounded very Spanish’ and praised the ‘typically Spanish way of walking’ of a dancer, while lamenting that another dance ‘was not so typically Spanish as I had expected.’<sup>106</sup>

Symons’ experience of Spain replicates what he underwent in Paris which, as Alex Murray puts it, transforms ‘the model of representation into one that disrupts the confluence between place and identity.’<sup>107</sup> In his essay ‘Montmartre and the Latin Quarter’ (1904, 1918), Symons describes these areas as ‘the two parts of Paris which are unique, the equivalent of which you will search for in vain elsewhere.’<sup>108</sup> As a result of their uniqueness, these quarters are, for Symons, ‘typically Parisian’.<sup>109</sup> In contrast, the Champs Elysées and the Grand Boulevards, where the majority of English tourists congregate, are the ‘least Parisian’ areas of the city.<sup>110</sup> For Symons,

the Grands Boulevards, which are always, certainly, attractive to any genuine lover of cities, to any real amateur of crowds, they are, after all, not Parisian, but cosmopolitan. They are simply the French equivalent of that great, complex, inextricable concourse of people which we find instinctively crowding, in London, along Piccadilly; in Berlin, down the Unter den Linden; in Madrid, over the Prado; in Venice, about the Piazza: a crowding of people who have come together from all the ends of the earth, who have, if tourist likes to meet tourist, mutual attraction enough; who have, undoubtedly, the curiosity of an exhibition or an ethnological museum; but from whom you will never learn the characteristics of the country in which you find them. What is really of interest in a city or in a nation is not that which it has, however differentiated, in common with other nations and cities, but that which is unique in it, the equivalent of which you will search for in vain elsewhere.<sup>111</sup>

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<sup>105</sup> Symons, ‘The Decadent Movement in Literature’, p. 859.

<sup>106</sup> Symons, ‘A Spanish Music-Hall’, pp. 147–50.

<sup>107</sup> Murray, *Landscapes of Decadence*, p. 74.

<sup>108</sup> Arthur Symons, ‘Montmartre and the Latin Quarter’, *Colour Studies in Paris* (London: Chapman and Hall, 1918), p. 24.

<sup>109</sup> Symons, ‘Montmartre and the Latin Quarter’, p. 29.

<sup>110</sup> Symons, ‘Montmartre and the Latin Quarter’, p. 23.

<sup>111</sup> Symons, ‘Montmartre and the Latin Quarter’, pp. 23–24.

Here Symons is outlining his own definition of cosmopolitan Decadence, a kind of cosmopolitanism that utterly differs from that exercised by middle-class tourists. This is why Symons' search for the soul of Paris leads him to Montmartre rather than the Grand Boulevards. And later on, his search for the soul of Rome would lead him to pagan Rome rather than the city of the Popes. In Barcelona, in Sevilla, and in Málaga, he would go to the cafes where flamenco Gypsies sang and danced rather than to their numerous churches.

However, the 'true', unique Spanish characteristics that Symons often highlights constitute stereotypes of extreme seriousness or extreme caricature, which may be read as the adoption of an Orientalist and patronising stance. Such an interpretation would be, although partly accurate, overly simplistic. In this context, Barry J. Faulk's discussion of Symons' distinct expertise in popular culture in relation to 'Camp' and modernity proves to be especially useful.<sup>112</sup> Camp offers a much needed complementary — and alternative — explanation for Symons' Orientalist approach to Spanish popular culture, and enriches and complicates a post-colonial critique of his writing.

If the essence of Camp is 'its love of the unnatural: of artifice and exaggeration', as Susan Sontag establishes, 'A Spanish Music-Hall' serves as a primer on Camp pleasures.<sup>113</sup> 'The art of the music hall is admittedly frivolous — the consecration of the frivolous', admits Symons at the beginning of his essay.<sup>114</sup> Being 'frivolous', it thus becomes 'culturally peripheral'.<sup>115</sup> For Faulk 'the oxymoron — "the

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<sup>112</sup> Barry J. Faulk, 'Camp Expertise: Arthur Symons, Music Hall, and the Defense of Theory', *Music hall and Modernity: The Late-Victorian Discovery of Popular Culture* (Athens: Ohio University Press, 2004).

<sup>113</sup> Susan Sontag, 'Notes on "Camp"', *Against Interpretation and Other Essays* (London: Penguin, 2009), p. 275.

<sup>114</sup> Symons, 'A Spanish Music-Hall', p. 145.

<sup>115</sup> Faulk, p. 53.



consecration of the frivolous” — remains suggestive: it suggests that frivolity contains enough charisma to reorganize a life’, which in exchange makes it ‘reductive’ to read Symons’ appreciation of the music hall — and of Spanish popular culture — as simply ‘iterating his critical’ — and colonialist — authority.<sup>116</sup> His Camp views, concludes Faulk, more likely ‘ironized the whole business of taste making.’<sup>117</sup>

This notion is equally connected to the Decadence’s cult of artifice, which Linda Dowling has described as a ‘counterpoetics of disruption and parody and stylistic derangement, a critique not so much of Wordsworthian nature as of the metaphysics involved in any sentimental notion of a simple world of grass and trees and flowers.’<sup>118</sup> The apparent Decadent frivolity, the parody, the irony, alongside the very serious quest for a new aesthetics are thus all essential components of Symons’ approach to and engagement with Spanish popular culture.

One of the first spectacles Symons alludes to in ‘A Spanish Music-Hall’ is the *zarzuela*, a traditional Spanish operetta. For Symons, the zarzuela ‘was amusing in its wildly farcical way — a farce of grotesque action, of incredible exaggeration.’<sup>119</sup> The interest of this art form is rooted then in its vulgarity, its hyperbolic character. Symons thus distances himself from the old-style dandy who hates vulgarity and becomes a modern dandy, ‘a connoisseur of Camp’ in the age of mass culture, who turns his back on the ‘good-bad axis of ordinary aesthetic judgement.’<sup>120</sup> He is seeking Spanishness, which he translates as excess, extreme states of feelings. It is the excess that Symons finds in Spanish popular culture that enables him to articulate his Decadent campiness.

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<sup>116</sup> Faulk, pp. 53–54.

<sup>117</sup> Faulk, p. 54.

<sup>118</sup> Dowling, p. x.

<sup>119</sup> Symons, ‘A Spanish Music-Hall’, p. 148.

<sup>120</sup> Sontag, pp. 286–89.

‘A Spanish Music-Hall’ is indeed packed with scornful attitudes. The irony marking Symons’ description of the Alcazar, notes Faulk, ‘signals both his distance from and his extreme empathic proximity to what he surveys’: ‘The entrance was not imposing, but it was covered with placards which had their interest.’<sup>121</sup> The audience in the hall, Symons writes in a clearly facetious manner, ‘was not a distinguished one.’<sup>122</sup> We find the same Camp, ironic attitudes in other Symons’ later texts on Spanish popular culture. In ‘Seville’ (written in 1898 but first published in 1901), for example, Symons writes:

All Spanish dancing, and especially the dancing of the gipsies, in which it is seen in its most characteristic development, has a sexual origin, and expresses, as Eastern dancing does, but less crudely, the pantomime of physical love. In the typical gipsy dance, as I saw it danced by a beautiful Gitana at Seville, there is something of mere gaminerie and something of the devil; the automatic tramp-tramp of the children and the lascivious pantomime of a very learned art of love.<sup>123</sup>

This passage, as Camp does, discloses innocence, but also corrupts it.<sup>124</sup> For Symons, flamenco dancing is Decadent, Camp, and modern, because it offers ‘the proper mixture of the exaggerated, the fantastic, the passionate, and the naïve.’<sup>125</sup> When Symons writes that flamenco dancing is ‘full of humour, fuller of humour than of passion’, he is epitomising Decadent parody and advancing Sontag’s notion of Camp as ‘a comic vision of the world.’<sup>126</sup> Symons’ Camp and proto-Modernist sensibility towards flamenco is even more dramatically displayed in the poem ‘Spain. To Josefa’

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<sup>121</sup> Faulk, p. 56; Symons, ‘A Spanish Music-Hall’, p. 146.

<sup>122</sup> Symons, ‘A Spanish Music-Hall’, p. 147.

<sup>123</sup> Symons, ‘Seville’, p. 18.

<sup>124</sup> Sontag, p. 283.

<sup>125</sup> Sontag, p. 283.

<sup>126</sup> Symons, ‘Seville’, p. 18; Sontag, p. 288.

(1899) in which Symons blends the figure of a flamenco singer named Josefa with Spain itself:

You sing of Spain, and all  
Clap hands for Spain and you, and for the  
song;  
[...]

Spain, brilliantly arrayed,  
Decked for disaster, on disaster hurled,  
Here, as in masquerade,  
Mimes, to amuse the world,  
Her ruin, a dancer rouged and draped and  
curled.<sup>127</sup>

In clear allusion to the contemporary ‘Spanish 1898 Disaster’, in this poem Symons portrays a campily pathetic Spain.<sup>128</sup> Symons displays the pathos that comes out of seriousness, and belittles the dramatic situation of the country: ‘She’, writes Symons in allusion to Spain, ‘who once found, has lost / A world beyond the waters.’<sup>129</sup> This loss is nonetheless unimportant because

she stands  
Paying the priceless cost,  
Lightly, with lives for lands,  
Flowers in her hair, castanets in her hands.<sup>130</sup>

In parallel, when the Spanish singer Josefa sings, ‘with clapping hands, the sorrows of / your Spain’, Symons thinks ‘how all the sorrows were in vain.’<sup>131</sup> The whole point

<sup>127</sup> Arthur Symons, ‘Spain. To Josefa’, *Images of Good and Evil* (London: William Heinemann, 1899), pp. 151–52.

<sup>128</sup> An allusion to the Spanish–American War fought between the United States and Spain in 1898. The defeat and loss of the last remnants of the Spanish Empire was a profound shock to Spain’s national psyche and came to be known as the ‘disaster’.

<sup>129</sup> Symons, ‘Spain. To Josefa’, p. 152.

<sup>130</sup> Symons, ‘Spain. To Josefa’, p. 152.

<sup>131</sup> Symons, ‘Spain. To Josefa’, p. 151.

of Camp is to dethrone the serious. Camp is playful, anti-serious. More precisely, Camp involves a new, more complex relation to ‘the serious’, as ‘a sensibility that, among other things, converts the serious into the frivolous’.<sup>132</sup> And yet, as Christopher Isherwood comments in *The World in the Evening*, ‘You can’t camp about something you don’t take seriously. You’re not making fun of it; you’re making fun out of it. You’re expressing what’s basically serious to you in terms of fun and artifice and elegance.’<sup>133</sup> There is seriousness in Camp — seriousness in the degree of the artist’s involvement — and, often, pathos.

And yet, as some of the extracts above show, Camp — and Decadent — irony can have problematic effects. The agents of cultural redefinition are often of upper- or middle-class standing who could, as Andrew Ross notes, ‘afford, literally, to redefine the life of consumerism and material affluence as a life of spiritual poverty.’<sup>134</sup> A Camp approach may thus perpetuate certain prejudices by veiling them as irony. Indeed, this campily proto-Modernist reading of Symons’ reception of flamenco is not to argue there is no evidence for a reading of Symons as Orientalist tourist. After all, Symons insisted on his descriptions of the ‘native’ dance, which, as Faulk observes, ‘appears to provide the English spectator definitive proof in an uncertain space of his own aplomb, status, and essential remove.’<sup>135</sup> ‘Spanish dances have a certain resemblance with the dances of the East’, wrote Symons, to later confirm that flamenco ‘no doubt derives its Eastern colour from the Moors.’<sup>136</sup> His writing repeatedly bestowed animal, savage-like and uncivilised characteristics to flamenco artists which he, however, undoubtedly considered unproblematic. In other words,

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<sup>132</sup> Sontag, p. 276.

<sup>133</sup> Christopher Isherwood, *The World in the Evening* (London: Methuen, 1954), p. 125.

<sup>134</sup> Andrew Ross, *No Respect: Intellectuals and Popular Culture* (New York: Routledge, 1989), p. 137.

<sup>135</sup> Faulk, p. 57.

<sup>136</sup> Symons, ‘A Spanish Music-Hall’, pp. 151–52.

although Symons believed he was celebrating and defending flamenco, he also participated in the outlook of his time and nationality to a greater extent than he realised. In the guise of celebrating them, he objectified the Spanish Gypsy artists all over again.

Camp and Decadent parody indeed permits Symons to sustain certain prejudices by thinly disguising them as irony, and to legitimise himself, but it also endows others with agency. The question of artistic agency here is crucial. In 'A Spanish Music Hall', for instance, Symons clearly establishes that 'in a music-hall the audience is a part of the performance', wielding almost equal levels of authority to the British tourist, the local audience and the flamenco artists.<sup>137</sup> In a similar vein, Havelock Ellis, with whom Symons travelled to Spain, also wrote in *The Soul of Spain* (1908) that

In flamenco dancing, among an audience of the people, every one takes a part, by rhythmic clapping and stamping, and by the occasional prolonged 'oles' and other cries by which the dancer is encouraged or applauded. Thus the dance is not a spectacle for the amusement of a languid and passive public, as with us. It is rather the visible embodiment of an emotion in which every spectator himself takes an active and helpful part; it is, as it were, a vision evoked by the spectators themselves and up-borne on the continuous waves of rhythmical sound which they generate.<sup>138</sup>

Ellis clearly established that in flamenco there were blurred boundaries between observer and observed, complicating the traditional power relations between native and 'coloniser'. Throughout 'A Spanish Music Hall', Symons also pays attention to how the artists utilise space. In this context, Faulk underscores how it is particularly

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<sup>137</sup> Symons, 'A Spanish Music-Hall', p. 145.

<sup>138</sup> Ellis, *The Soul of Spain* (1908), p. 180.

important to note the special care that Symons takes to situate flamenco artists ‘back in the everyday once their performance is finished’.<sup>139</sup>

The close of the performance by the flamenco singer Villaclara, for example, underscores the performer’s control and agency: ‘When the applause was over she returned the hat, came back to the table at which she had been sitting, dismally enough, and yawned more desperately than ever.’<sup>140</sup> Similarly, the flamenco dance of Isabel Santos and her daughter is the most erotic event Symons witnessed at the Alcazar: ‘The dance grew more exciting, with a sort of lascivious suggestiveness, a morbid, perverse charm, as the women writhed to and fro, now languishingly, now furiously, together and apart.’<sup>141</sup> However, after ‘two encores and two more dances’, Symons adds, ‘the women went tranquilly back to the corner where they had been drinking with their friends.’<sup>142</sup> Symons is here fracturing the setting that surrounds the artwork as commodity and, as a result, showing both the aesthetic context and the social context which it is contingent upon. These dancers and singers alternate effortlessly from performers to mundane people. This could be interpreted as a reinforcement of the clichés about Spanish daily life, as it depicts a world ruled by, as Faulk points out, ‘high passion, fierce desire, and violent turmoil’.<sup>143</sup> And yet the return to passivity suggests ‘quite the opposite’, as the performers calmly ‘negotiate different spaces, in control of their performance’, able to turn their charisma off and on.<sup>144</sup>

In fact, Symons gestures towards the vernacular expertise of the local flamenco artists throughout the essay ‘A Spanish Music-Hall’. At the end of the piece, Symons suggests a sort of mutual recognition when he describes the flamenco dancer Isabel

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<sup>139</sup> Faulk, p. 60.

<sup>140</sup> Symons, ‘A Spanish Music-Hall’, p. 155.

<sup>141</sup> Symons, ‘A Spanish Music-Hall’, p. 153.

<sup>142</sup> Symons, ‘A Spanish Music-Hall’, p. 155.

<sup>143</sup> Faulk, p. 59.

<sup>144</sup> Faulk, p. 59.

Santos as a ‘great artist’, who had ‘a profound artistic seriousness.’<sup>145</sup> Likewise, in Symons’ poems on flamenco, the ‘native’ dancer or singer appears to have agency and be in control of both Symons and the audience. ‘Therefore you hold me, body and soul, in your / hold’, writes Symons in ‘To a Gitana Dancing’ (1899).<sup>146</sup> Whatever the dancer does, Symons ‘follows’ and he only awakens when she pauses:

It brightens, I follow; it fades, and I see it afar;  
You pause: I awake; have I dreamt?<sup>147</sup>

In the poem ‘Spain’, the artist Josefa also

sing[s] of Spain, and all  
Clap hands for Spain and you, and for the  
song,<sup>148</sup>

These lines suggest that Josefa’s artistic power is recognised — her voice is heard: she sings and all clap hands — uniting once more the British tourist with the local audience and the flamenco artist. The moment that Symons, as audience, becomes ‘part of the performance’, and, as artist, acknowledges flamenco artists as ‘professional’, one could argue that he is no longer seeing them as ‘other’. Symons crucially described the Spanish flamenco *cante*, or singing, as ‘the crying of a wild beast in suffering, and it thrills one precisely because it seems to be so far from humanity, so inexplicable, so deeply rooted in the animal of which we are but one species.’<sup>149</sup> The pronoun ‘we’ becomes crucial here, as Symons aligns himself with the observed Other.

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<sup>145</sup> Symons, ‘A Spanish Music-Hall’, p. 156.

<sup>146</sup> Symons, ‘To a Gitana Dancing (Seville)’, p. 107.

<sup>147</sup> Symons, ‘To a Gitana Dancing (Seville)’, p. 108.

<sup>148</sup> Symons, ‘Spain. To Josefa’, p. 151.

<sup>149</sup> Symons, ‘Moorish Secrets in Spain’, p. 103.

At the same time, to say that Symons' writing solely orientalises Spanish flamenco is to forget a crucial artistic angle. Linda Dowling has foregrounded how Symons' understanding and inclusion of the dance in his poetic work caused him 'to shift aesthetic authority from the intellectual *to* the sensuous' and thus highlights the 'importance of visceral perception in understanding artistic performances.'<sup>150</sup> Symons' iterated insistence upon the 'visceral, animal knowledge of the blood, upon "dance as life, animal life, having its own way passionately" [...] specifically challenges verbal language [...] rather than the possibility of expressive language in general.'<sup>151</sup> The gestural language of the dance seemed thus 'wonderfully fresh, immediate, and uncompromised by "impurities"', as opposed to 'the Victorian tyranny of "abstraction" and "discursiveness."<sup>152</sup> Hence, Dowling concludes, Symons' characteristic portrayal of the dancer as at once 'innocent and yet almost narcissistically or onanistically self-sufficient.'<sup>153</sup> For this reason,

To say that the narrators of Symons' poems find this self-sufficiency erotic is merely to insist upon the sensual, visceral basis of the gestural language. Yet clearly to celebrate gesture in this way was to prefer a language even more 'primitive' than the lower-class vernaculars, for it was assumed that the more physically overt the linguistic sign, the cruder the mental capacity of the sign-maker.<sup>154</sup>

The primitiveness and vernacular condition of Spanish flamenco becomes thus instrumental to Symons' understanding of artistic language. Of all the dances, for Symons flamenco is the most pure, the most authentic, the most perfect. Dancing, as the emblem of the ideal work of art, is perfected in Spain:

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<sup>150</sup> Dowling, p. 239.

<sup>151</sup> Dowling, pp. 239–40.

<sup>152</sup> Dowling, p. 241.

<sup>153</sup> Dowling, p. 241.

<sup>154</sup> Dowling, p. 241.



in the [Spanish] dancing, inherited from the Moors, which the gipsies have perfected in Spain, there is far more subtlety, delicacy, and real art than in the franker posturing of Egypt and Arabia. It is the most elaborate dancing in the world, and, like the music, it has an abstract quality which saves it from ever, for a moment, becoming vulgar. As I have watched a Gitana dancing in Seville, I have thought of the sacred dances which in most religions have given a perfectly solemn and collected symbolism to the creative forces of the world.<sup>155</sup>

These remarks recall those included in the short story ‘Dolores’, by Edith Ellis, with whom Symons also spent some time in Málaga in 1898. Written in 1899, but published in April 1909 in *The Smart Set*, the story was based on her only visit to the country in 1898 with her husband, Havelock Ellis, and with Symons. It is the semi-autobiographical story of a young British wife who accompanies her journalist husband and his friend to witness flamenco in a southern Spanish music-hall. In the piece, the British woman, Ju, undergoes a moment of revelation when she watches Dolores, a Spanish Gypsy woman, dancing:

Ju felt she needed a hundred eyes; she had rarely been so alive. The magnetic power of all those happy people on and off the stage entered her veins like strong wine. [...] Ju could scarcely breathe. [...] All the mad, wild beauty of the world seemed singing in her head as her eyes followed the retreating figure of the woman who had danced life into her tired brain. Never, even in church, she thought, had she felt so rested, so uplifted as now; rarely had she been so absurdly happy. Her child’s fingers against her breast, a lark singing in the early spring, the first primrose gathered for the year, all the simple, delicate joys of life had not given her the exquisite sense of rest that the vigorous movements of this dancing girl had done.<sup>156</sup>

Ju had never felt ‘so rested’ and yet ‘so uplifted’, pointing towards the revelatory cultural and experiential moment she encountered in the extremes of Spain, as opposed to the grey drabness of Victorian Britain. Perhaps Ju had never felt such zeal because,

<sup>155</sup> Symons, ‘Moorish Secrets in Spain’, pp. 104–05.

<sup>156</sup> Edith Ellis, ‘Dolores’, *The Smart Set*, 27, April 1909, pp. 125–26.

as she declared, she had ‘never seen real dancing before’.<sup>157</sup> It was in this Spanish music-hall where ‘for the first time in her life she saw passion, grace, joy and vigor combined in the movements of a beautiful woman, who was as free from vulgarity and self-consciousness as a flower.’<sup>158</sup>

These claims mimic those noted by Symons above in his essay ‘Moorish Secrets in Spain’ (1899, 1918) about flamenco dancing being ‘the most elaborate dancing in the world’, and, having, like the music, ‘an abstract quality which saves it from ever [...] becoming vulgar.’<sup>159</sup> Both Symons and Edith Ellis perceived a core of intensity in flamenco attached to an internal, elemental and primitive condition.

Symons described Spanish flamenco music as ‘no other passion’ mainly because it ‘is inarticulate, and so it brings a wild relief which no articulate music could ever bring.’<sup>160</sup> This music is ‘the voice of uncivilised people who have the desires and sorrows common to every living being, and an unconsciousness of their meaning which is, after all, what we come back to after having searched through many meanings.’<sup>161</sup> Symons inverts the hierarchy of ‘savage’ and civilised, showing a preference for this ‘savage’, ‘inarticulate’ form of language to the civilised verbal, articulate language: ‘A few words seemed to be repeated over and over again, with tremulous, inarticulate cries that wavered in time to a regularly beating rhythm. The sound was like nothing I have ever heard. It pierced the brain, it tortured one with a sort of delicious spasm.’<sup>162</sup>

Symons thus equates what he calls the ‘inarticulacy’ of flamenco art — its lack of articulation, of segments — with the ideal of Decadence: ‘to be a disembodied

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<sup>157</sup> Ellis, ‘Dolores’, p. 126.

<sup>158</sup> Ellis, ‘Dolores’, p. 126.

<sup>159</sup> Symons, ‘Moorish Secrets in Spain’, pp. 104–05.

<sup>160</sup> Symons, ‘Moorish Secrets in Spain’, p. 103.

<sup>161</sup> Symons, ‘Moorish Secrets in Spain’, p. 103.

<sup>162</sup> Symons, ‘A Spanish Music-Hall’, p. 154.

voice, and yet the voice of a human soul.’<sup>163</sup> Flamenco art is divested of articulated language, of ‘joints’, in the same way that Decadence is divested of ‘a body’. Flamenco is revealed as a perverse pleasure which, being primitive and eternal, seems impossibly unprecedented. Tantalised by its immateriality and inarticulacy, Symons would try to replicate the primitiveness of Spanish flamenco in his own syntax. As Dowling notes, ‘in his brief poems of “primitive” syntax he [Symons] sought to embody [...] truth in language’, creating a ‘concerted effort at verbal gesture, at reincarnating the disembodied voice’.<sup>164</sup> In the aforementioned poem ‘To a Gitana Dancing’, for instance, Symons combines descriptions that allude to the ancient, primitive condition of flamenco: ‘And the maze you tread is as old as the world is old’, with a simple, almost primitive syntax that altogether lacks adjectives and adverbs and confers all the prominence to the verb, that one element capable of indicating an action, like dancing:

You laugh, and I know the despair, and you  
smile, and I know

[...]  
It brightens, I follow; it fades, and I see it afar;<sup>165</sup>

In an 1898 letter from Seville to the Scottish politician and writer Robert Cunninghame Graham (1852–1936) in which Symons enclosed the poem, he explained that the piece was done ‘with a most elaborate attempt to express the thing by the coiling of the rhythm, repetition of words and inner rhymes, and unusual pauses. To get exactly the rhythmical effect I have intended, read aloud and read for the sense,

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<sup>163</sup> Symons, ‘The Decadent Movement in Literature’, p. 862.

<sup>164</sup> Dowling, pp. 242–43.

<sup>165</sup> Symons, ‘To a Gitana Dancing (Seville)’, p. 108.

allowing the voice to pause where it naturally would.’<sup>166</sup> By asking Cunninghame Graham to read the poem aloud and allow the voice to pause, Symons emphasises the rhythmic inarticulacy of flamenco, its unvoiced condition. If Spanish places had served Symons to embark upon an ‘interior’ journey from impression to symbol, flamenco art enabled him to express in writing an ‘inner’ rhythm.

## Conclusion

As this chapter has shown, Symons’ reception of and engagement with flamenco remain dialectical and complex. When Symons writes that flamenco ‘no doubt derives in Eastern colours from the Moors’<sup>167</sup> and that flamenco dancers are ‘primitive and elemental [with] the slumbering inner glow of the sombre passion of their race, and have the alertness of a young and wild animal’ it is difficult to avoid a reading of Symons as an Orientalist tourist and writer.<sup>168</sup> While partly accurate, I have argued throughout that such a reading would also be reductive. Rather than focusing on the negativity of Symons’ Orientalist and primitivist discourse regarding flamenco dancing, I have been primarily concerned with interrogating how the relationship between the ‘describer’ Symons and the Spanish ‘native’ voices could be understood as further enriching and complicating cross-cultural exchange.

The new expressive ideal Symons found in the language of music, and especially of dance, was for him perfected in Spanish flamenco. Flamenco was taken

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<sup>166</sup> Arthur Symons to Robert Cunninghame Graham, [November] 1898, National Library of Scotland, Cunninghame Graham Papers, Acc.11335, fol. 56.

<sup>167</sup> Symons, ‘A Spanish Music-Hall’, p. 152.

<sup>168</sup> Arthur Symons, ‘Amalia Molina’ in *Notes on Spanish Dancers and Spanish Gypsies*, 22 May 1920, Box 13 Folder 18, Arthur Symons Papers, Department of Rare Books and Special Collections, Princeton University Library, Princeton New Jersey, USA.

seriously by Symons, it was intellectually described in his articles and reviews throughout his life, reproduced in his poetry, and it was crucial for the development of his ideas on the symbolic power of the dance. For Symons, the primitiveness of flamenco became the quintessence of art, and the body language of Spanish modernity. He recognised the mysterious power that motivates flamenco as the spontaneous creativity evocative of an artistic spirit. Those primal, 'elemental passions' of Spanish popular culture unveiled for Symons a sense of modernity.

The extremes, excess and contradictions of Spain as place also permeate Symons' writing: 'All the doors, leading to the patio, are of open iron-work [...] This throwing open of one's house to the street, yet with an iron door, always closed, setting a boundary to the feet if not to the eyes, seems to me again characteristic of these natural, not self-conscious people, who seem often so careless of their own dignity and liberty, and are so well able to preserve them.'<sup>169</sup> The Spanish boundaries that can be crossed with the eyes but not the feet reveal the country as a space of transgression where the unconscious, as opposed to the 'self-conscious', might be explored: a sort of internal transgression of Victorian moral laws.

The Spanish *genius loci*, with its 'past within the present' and interior/exterior dichotomies, accompanied Symons' intellectual and artistic evolution during the 1890s, and proved crucial to his articulation of Decadence, Impressionism, and eventually Symbolism. As Lhombreaud highlights, the last months of 1898 and early 1899, spent in Spain, were crucial to Symons' artistic evolution: 'It would be fitting to mark time here in order to realise fully that at this juncture there was a change of direction both in the existence and the thought of Symons.'<sup>170</sup> One of the most

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<sup>169</sup> Symons, 'Seville', p. 8.

<sup>170</sup> Lhombreaud, p. 152.

prominent aspects of this change of direction was Symons' investment in mysticism, which also held strong Spanish connotations. A pivotal aspect of late Decadent culture, mysticism was also associated with the search for an inarticulate 'disembodied voice' and a notion of cultural extremes, which the final chapter of this thesis takes as its focus.

## 4.

**‘Full of Fire’: Spanish Mystics, Michael Field and the Erotics of Catholicism**

The poetry of San Juan de la Cruz is metaphysical fire, a sort of white heat in which the abstract, the almost negative, becomes ecstatically realised by the senses.<sup>1</sup>

Arthur Symons (1899)

It is almost appalling to find how strong the capricious dominion of the senses still is in this devoted servant of God.<sup>2</sup>

Michael Field (1909)

**Introduction**

In an undated but *c.* 1909 letter, Katharine Bradley wrote to her fellow Catholic convert, the poet John Gray, ‘As you would imagine S. Theresa absolutely is what I should Love to have been — orthodox, full of “fire” — blest with visions.’<sup>3</sup> For Bradley, the spiritual ‘fire’ of the sixteenth-century Spanish mystic St Teresa implies a connection between erotic and mystical experience, which would become instrumental throughout the converted life of Michael Field (the pseudonym used by Bradley and her niece and lover Edith Cooper). Through the construction of such a dialectic between sensuality and spirituality, I argue, the features of Spanish mystic

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<sup>1</sup> Arthur Symons, ‘The Poetry of Santa Teresa and San Juan de la Cruz’, *Cities and Sea-Coasts and Islands* (London: W. Collins, 1918), p. 67. This essay was first published in April 1899 in the *Contemporary Review*, and then reprinted in *Cities and Sea-Coasts and Islands*.

<sup>2</sup> Michael Field, *Works and Days*, British Library, Add. MS 46799, f. 144.

<sup>3</sup> Katharine Bradley to John Gray, [*c.* 1909], National Library of Scotland, Gray & Raffalovich, Dep. 372, N17.

poetry — also that of St John of the Cross — enabled the formerly ‘pagan’, Decadent poets Michael Field to develop their Catholic poetry of the 1910s. Bradley’s words to Gray serve as a starting point for this final chapter, allowing me to reconstruct the significance of St Teresa and St John of the Cross’s aesthetics for Michael Field, within the wider context of Catholic Decadent interest in Spanish mysticism from the late 1890s.

The Decadent fascination with Christian mysticism was bitterly arraigned by W.B. Yeats in 1910. That year, Yeats delivered several lectures on the ‘melancholy’ mysticism of what he called a ‘strange doomed generation.’<sup>4</sup> For Yeats, the members of this generation did not realise that descending into the abyss of the self required a change from contemplative to active thought. Yeats was mainly alluding to his male Decadent friends in the Rhymers’ Club: Arthur Symonds, John Gray (1866–1934), Ernest Dowson (1867–1900) and Lionel Johnson (1867–1902), but his words also describe Michael Field’s Decadent approach to religion at the end of their life.<sup>5</sup> For Yeats, this generation’s unwholesome fascination with sanctity and vision could be explained by analogy with the Christian mystics, and in particular with the Spanish St John of the Cross. ‘They had gone into the wilderness and they had found there what St John at the Cross [*sic*] has called the “obscure night of the soul,”’ but the saint, he warned, can more readily ‘pass safely through the gloom’ than the poet.<sup>6</sup> The wilderness, Yeats claimed,

is full of wild beasts, the passions become infinite and powerful energy because they are no longer controlled and limited by circumstance and habit

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<sup>4</sup> W.B. Yeats, ‘Lecture Notes for “Friends of My Youth”’, *Yeats and the Theatre*, ed. by Robert O’Driscoll and Lorna Reynolds (London: Macmillan, 1975), p. 73. Yeats delivered this lecture on 9 March 1910 in London.

<sup>5</sup> Yeats would memorialise and mythologise these poets as ‘The Tragic Generation’ in his 1935 autobiography.

<sup>6</sup> Yeats, ‘Lecture Notes for “Friends of My Youth”’, p. 69.



but must be faced in the depth of the mind. To enter into the mind, to renounce all but the mind or what excites it to its highest intensity, that is the toil of the saint and the lyric poet. But all those passions which the saint may at last tame the poets need in their wildness.<sup>7</sup>

Yeats believed that mysticism became devastating when the poet yielded to the temptation to sing his or her personal, inner passions: ‘He separates himself from all else, for like the Saint he has his wilderness, he knows that there is nothing that sings but passion and that the greatest passions are one’s own. He would give nothing but pure flame.’<sup>8</sup> But when these intense moments abated, Yeats thought, the poet would be surrounded by a terrifying darkness. For him, the inner suffering of his Catholic friends was due to ‘that hidden meditation wherein they lost or saved their souls and certainly lost the world.’<sup>9</sup> Ultimately, Yeats opted for avoiding the destructive excess of his generation’s melancholic mysticism through Cabalistic meditation, distancing himself from the movement. The mystic excess that Yeats shied away from was, nonetheless, identified by Decadent writers as a virtue. This transcendental excess endowed them with a sense of spiritual and sensory freedom, which they considered essential in art and in life.

Although Catholicism was already a radical presence in *fin-de-siècle* culture, in the 1890s it became almost a trend in Decadent literary circles. As Claire Masurel-Murray claims, ‘what is called the “Decadent” movement probably counts in its ranks more converts than any other school in the history of British literature.’<sup>10</sup> John Gray, generally remembered as an important figure in the Oscar Wilde circle and the author of an iconic volume of nineties verse, *Silverpoints* (1893), underwent two conversions

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<sup>7</sup> Yeats, ‘Lecture Notes for “Friends of My Youth”’, p. 69.

<sup>8</sup> Yeats, ‘Lecture Notes for “Friends of My Youth”’, p. 80.

<sup>9</sup> Yeats, ‘Lecture Notes for “Friends of My Youth”’, p. 81.

<sup>10</sup> Claire Masurel-Murray, ‘Conversions to Catholicism among Fin de Siècle Writers: A Spiritual and Literary Genealogy’, *Cahiers victoriens et édouardiens*, 76 (2012) <<http://doi.org/10.4000/cve.528>>, p.1.

in 1890 and 1894, and was ordained to the priesthood in 1903. Ernest Dowson, often cited as the best lyric poet of the *fin de siècle*, converted in 1891, the same year as his fellow poet and friend Lionel Johnson. The trials of Oscar Wilde in 1895 for ‘gross indecency’ also propelled the conversion of a number of other British Decadent writers who found in the Catholic Church a better receptacle for their aesthetics. Aubrey Beardsley became a Catholic in 1897. Oscar Wilde himself was received in the Church on his deathbed in 1900, and his lover Lord Alfred Douglas in 1911. Michael Field entered the Roman Catholic Church in 1907. Catholicism appears as a theme, major or minor, in the works of all these writers, but Catholic subjects and motifs also surface in the works of British Decadent writers whose biography does not reveal any personal allegiance to the Catholic creed, such as Arthur Symons, Theodore Wratislaw (1871–1933) or George Moore (1852–1933), underlining the wider influence of the Roman faith in the literary world at the time.

The reasons for the conversion of many British writers and for the interest that Catholicism awakened in many others at the time are complex, and it is unproductive to attempt to find a single, comfortable link between the aesthetic practices of these writers and the Church of Rome. Yet there are a number of dominant themes, many of which coalesce around the problems of sex and sexuality. Ellis Hanson, in his comprehensive study *Decadence and Catholicism* (1997), argues that Decadent writers found in the Catholic Church ‘a peculiar language for artistic and sexual expression’.<sup>11</sup> Catholicism emerged as ‘the odd disruption, the hysterical symptom, the mystical effusion, the medieval spectacle, the last hope for paganism, in an age of Victorian Puritanism, Enlightenment rationalism, and bourgeois materialism.’<sup>12</sup> As

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<sup>11</sup> Hanson, p. 26.

<sup>12</sup> Hanson, p. 26.

both Decadence and Catholicism are elaborate paradoxes, Hanson observes, the space offered by Catholic ritual allowed the contradictions of Decadence to exist unresolved.

The nature of the Catholic liturgy in itself also attracted many *fin-de-siècle* writers, who were mostly of Protestant background. Protestant worship focuses on Scripture, while Catholicism embraces liturgical symbols as visible signs of a spiritual grace. Indeed, the Catholic church believes that symbols and rituals confer God's grace. 'It is precisely this sensory, even sensuous, dimension of Catholicism', Masurel-Murray notes, that appealed to Decadent writers, and from which some of them drew their inspiration.<sup>13</sup> Roman Catholicism is represented in Decadent texts as a sort of 'aesthetic utopia, a self-contained world' built in opposition to the ugliness and vulgarity of modern materialism: one of the last, nostalgic bastions of pre-industrialisation.<sup>14</sup>

The aesthetic connotation of Catholic ritual, indeed, fascinated Decadent writers, who, as Yeats flippantly described in 1898, liked the idea of 'a world full of altar lights and golden vestures, and murmured Latin and incense clouds [...] where one wanders remembering martyrdoms and courtesies that the world has forgotten.'<sup>15</sup> The Decadents were, as Hanson puts it, 'transfixed by the textual *bizarrerie* of Catholicism. Some of them [...] reproduced in their own works the obscure debates of theologians, the sublime eroticism of the mystics, the very leap of faith that every Christian genre ultimately demands.'<sup>16</sup> Precisely because of this Decadent fascination

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<sup>13</sup> Claire Masurel-Murray, 'From the Beauty of Religion to the Religion of Beauty: Catholicism and Aestheticism in Fin-de-Siècle Poetry', in *Ecstasy and Understanding: Religious Awareness in English Poetry from the Late Victorian to the Modern Period*, ed. by Adrian Grafe (London: Continuum, 2008), p. 18.

<sup>14</sup> Masurel-Murray, 'From the Beauty of Religion to the Religion of Beauty: Catholicism and Aestheticism in Fin-de-Siècle Poetry', p. 18.

<sup>15</sup> W.B. Yeats, 'Lionel Johnson', *Prefaces and Introductions: Uncollected Prefaces and Introductions by Yeats to Works by Other Authors and to Anthologies Edited by Yeats*, ed. by William H. O'Donnell (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1988), p. 112.

<sup>16</sup> Hanson, p. 6.

with the ‘paraphernalia’ of the Catholic Church, their Catholic writing has not always been taken seriously — as Yeats’ quote above proves. As Mark Knight and Emma Mason observe, Decadent Catholicism is rejected by some ‘as a mere pose; others ignore the religious ideas they espoused, arguing that they are merely a symptom of more profound intellectual and cultural forces, such as sexuality, aestheticism, and symbolism.’<sup>17</sup> Yet, Knight and Mason argue, recognising the unique contribution of Catholic theology to literary and cultural developments in the late nineteenth century ‘does not entail privileging theology as the only cultural determinant [...] It does, however, insist on acknowledging a religious element that has sometimes been ignored.’<sup>18</sup>

This chapter therefore unveils and explicates one of the primary sources of Catholic theology for Decadent writers: the Spanish mystic poetry of the sixteenth century. Spanish mysticism is, I argue, *the* constant non-Biblical presence in the Catholic-inspired texts of Decadent writers. St John of the Cross and St Teresa’s texts were widely read and discussed in Decadent circles, and constantly alluded to in poetry and prose. St John of the Cross’s ‘obscure night of the soul’ becomes a literary trope in Ernest Dowson’s poem ‘Absinthia Taetra’ (1899), used to describe his experience with absinthe.<sup>19</sup> Lionel Johnson’s poem ‘To a Spanish Friend’ (1895) is brimming with references to St Teresa and delights in her ‘everlasting fire’ and the ‘flame’ of her ‘desire’.<sup>20</sup> George Moore’s two novels *Evelyn Innes* (1898) and *Sister Teresa*

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<sup>17</sup> Mark Knight and Emma Mason, *Nineteenth-Century Religion and Literature: An Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), p. 191.

<sup>18</sup> Knight and Mason, p. 191.

<sup>19</sup> Ernest Dowson, ‘Absinthia Taetra’, in *Decorations in Verse and Prose* (London: Leonard Smithers, 1899), p. 47.

<sup>20</sup> Lionel Johnson, ‘To a Spanish Friend’, in *Poems* (London: Elkin Mathews, 1895), p. 88.

(1901) document the conversion of a troubled, operatic soprano and her life as a nun, with constant direct allusions to St Teresa of Avila's life and work.<sup>21</sup>

It is in the works of Arthur Symons, and, fundamentally, Michael Field, however, in which the presence of Spanish mysticism acquires crucial relevance. This chapter looks first, then, at the importance of Spanish mysticism for Arthur Symons in the late 1890s, which serves to frame the importance of the Spanish mystics in relation to Symbolist, and erotic, artistic notions. I then focus on the convert Michael Field's understanding of and relation to Spanish mysticism in the 1900s and 1910s — mediated by their relationship with John Gray — and its crucial connection to their female homoeroticism. Spanish mysticism, this chapter contends, provides a way of taking Michael Field's turn to Catholicism seriously without simply reading it as repressive and inherently less interesting than their previous life.

The relationship between Decadence and Catholicism, especially its connection to same-sex desire, has been the object of increasing interest since Ellis Hanson's *Decadence and Catholicism* (1997). Frederick S. Roden's *Same-Sex Desire in Victorian Religious Culture* (2002) examines the pivotal role of Catholicism in the work of Decadent poets like John Gray and Michael Field, while Marion Thain's *Michael Field: Poetry, Aestheticism and the Fin de Siècle* (2007) offers new and fruitful readings of the Catholic poetry of these two women poets. In the collection of essays *Ecstasy and Understanding: Religious Awareness in English Poetry from the Late Victorian to the Modern Period* (2008), Claire Masurel-Murray also provides an overview of the meaning of Catholicism for Aestheticism and *fin-de-siècle* poetry. All of these works make allusions to some extent to the work of the Spanish mystics, but

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<sup>21</sup> George Moore dedicated *Evelyn Innes* to Symons and Yeats, after Symons advised him on and read the proofs of the novel. See Symons, *Arthur Symons: Selected Letters*, p. 115.

the crucial influence and particular significance of Spanish mystic poetry as a whole and as an individual school has never been considered.

The importance of the Spanish mystic school that flourished in the sixteenth century is twofold, both religious and literary. This movement included some of the most important leaders in Christian mystical theology and in the early modern Catholic Reformation, namely St Teresa of Avila (1515–1582) and St John of the Cross (1542–1591). Both saints are also regarded as the two most important figures of the Spanish mystic movement. Coinciding with the Counter-Reformation, St Teresa and St John were united in their desire to drastically reform their monastic order, the Carmelites, and train its members in mystical prayer through a renewal of primitive communal discipline and individual spiritual direction. Indeed, much of the newly emerging mysticism in staunchly Catholic Spain during the sixteenth century presented, as Ursula King puts it, ‘a dramatic break with the spiritual tradition of the early Church and the Middle Ages’ and was ‘marked by a mixture of activity, austerity and ceaseless striving’.<sup>22</sup> In a similar vein, Julia Kristeva describes the Spanish mysticism of the Counter-Reformation as ‘the supernatural excess, the fervid amorous transports, the ever more bizarre extremes that enacted the risks of subjective freedom’.<sup>23</sup> Not surprisingly, these nonconformist mystical movements attracted the attention of the Spanish Inquisition, which judged some of their methods as unorthodox and dangerous.

Alongside this transgressive spiritual dimension, the literary output of the

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<sup>22</sup> Ursula King, *Christian Mystics: Their Lives and Legacies throughout the Ages* (London: Routledge, 2004), p. 143. For a more detailed account of the efflorescence of mysticism in sixteenth-century Spain see also E. Allison Peers, *Studies of the Spanish Mystics*, 3 vols (London: SPCK, 1951); Andrés Martín Melquiades, *Historia de la mística de la Edad de Oro en España y América* (Madrid: Biblioteca de Autores Cristianos, 1994); and *Faith and Fanatism: Religious Fervour in Early Modern Spain*, ed. by Lesley K. Twomey (Aldershot: Ashgate, 1997).

<sup>23</sup> Julia Kristeva, *Teresa, My Love: An Imagined Life of the Saint of Avila*, trans. by Lorna Scott Fox (New York: Columbia University Press, 2014), p. 44.

mystics catalysed the Golden Age of Spanish Literature. Their literary importance lies in their attempts to transcend the boundaries of language and liberate previously untapped resources of expression. The writings of the Spanish mystics dramatise a search for God rooted in passion and desire rather than in duty and medieval legalism. Edgar Allison Peers singles out a combination of particular characteristics that gave Spanish mystic literature an unmistakable individuality: 'it is concrete, practical, personal, experiential, active.'<sup>24</sup> One of the striking attributes of their writing is their use of a passionate language of love, drawn largely from the courtly love tradition of the *cancioneros* or Spanish chansonniers. In real life, the mystics aspired, like the poets of the *cancioneros*, to a perfect love purified by suffering. Their poetry is courtly, but it is also extremely erotic, with allusions to 'encounters' and the 'rending of the veil'. These were well-established concepts in sixteenth-century Spanish literature, signifying 'sexual intercourse' and the 'breaking of the hymen.'<sup>25</sup> Spanish mystic poetry establishes, then, a poetic analogy between profane and sacred love, and indeed at times same-sex desire: an enabling analogy for the formerly 'pagan' and newly Catholic lesbian poets Bradley and Cooper during the 1900s and 1910s. But first, in order to fully grasp the significance of these symbolic analogies, an exploration of Arthur Symonds' Symbolist understanding of Spanish mystic poetry in the late 1890s is in order.

### **Framing Symbolist and Erotic Mysticism**

Notwithstanding his aforementioned reservations about the Decadent use of Christian

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<sup>24</sup> E. Allison Peers, *Studies of the Spanish Mystics*, 3 vols (London: SPCK, 1951), i, p. xvii.

<sup>25</sup> Terence O'Reilly offers a fascinating exploration of courtly love and mysticism in Spanish poetry in her book *From Ignatius Loyola to John of the Cross: Spirituality and Literature in Sixteenth-Century Spain* (Aldershot: Variorum, 1995).

mysticism, in his 1935 *Autobiography* W.B. Yeats praised Arthur Symons' translations of the Spanish mystic St John of the Cross, and of the French poets Mallarmé and Verlaine, as 'the most accomplished metrical translations of our time.'<sup>26</sup> Consequently, when Yeats edited the *Oxford Book of Modern Verse* in 1936, he chose only Symons' translations as representative of his work, including Symons' version of St John of the Cross' poem 'The Obscure Night of the Soul'.<sup>27</sup> Symons' translations of and critical works on the French Symbolists have been, as already pointed out in my third chapter, widely explored by scholars, but his crucial work on the Spanish mystics of the sixteenth century — closely linked to the former — has passed relatively unnoticed.

The purpose of this first section is, therefore, to take in the importance of Spanish mystic poetry for Symons, both as a subject of translation and as an impetus for his own poetic and critical work. Symons' engagement with Spanish mysticism is vital in order to comprehend the symbolic and erotic potentialities of Catholicism that would later inform Michael Field's religious work. I first examine here Symons' reading of the mystics, looking at the article 'The Poetry of Santa Teresa and San Juan de la Cruz' that he published in the *Contemporary Review* in 1899. Later, I consider his translations and the influence of the mystics' poetry on his volume of verse *Images of Good and Evil*, also published in 1899.

As John M. Munro observes, Symons was not a 'conventionally religious man'.<sup>28</sup> He foreswore the Wesleyan faith of his parents in adolescence, but the creed of sin and damnation seems to have remained perpetually with him. Symons did not

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<sup>26</sup> W.B. Yeats, *The Autobiography of William Butler Yeats: Consisting of Reveries over Childhood and Youth, The Trembling of the Veil, and Dramatis Personae* (New York: Collier, 1965), p. 214.

<sup>27</sup> *The Oxford Book of Modern Verse 1892–1935*, ed. by W.B. Yeats (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1936).

<sup>28</sup> Munro, p. 55.



convert to Catholicism as many of his contemporaries did, but he found in the Catholic work of the French Decadents a genuinely religious symbolism: in Villiers de L'Isle-Adam he saw the Church as a 'symbol of austere intellectual beauty,' while in Verlaine he observed that 'the love of God is not merely a rapture, it is a thanksgiving for forgiveness.'<sup>29</sup> In the late 1890s, he became particularly interested in the spiritual world and in mysticism. It was his association with Yeats, most notably after a trip they took to Ireland in 1896, that was to lead to an embracing of Christian mystical ideas, and to a rethinking of Symbolism in terms of an idealist discourse against a materialistic world. This evolution of Symons' thought was expressed in *The Symbolist Movement in Literature* (1899), which was dedicated to Yeats. In this dedication, Symons already established the connections he was about to make between Symbolism and mysticism, by saying:

I speak often in this book of Mysticism, and that I, of all people, should venture to speak, not quite as an outsider, of such things, will probably be a surprise to many. It will be no surprise to you, for you have seen me gradually finding my way, uncertainly but inevitably, in that direction which has always been to you your natural direction.<sup>30</sup>

In the conclusion of the volume, Symons overtly declared how Symbolism was ultimately concerned with mysticism, for its poetry was something of a protest against an age of materialism which had lost its belief in traditional religion, and it was the Symbolists' concern to find an effective substitute. For Symons, mysticism was the ideal way to combine art, religion and passion, the sensory realm of the body and the free domain of the soul. As he wrote:

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<sup>29</sup> Symons, *The Symbolist Movement in Literature* (1899), p. 44; p. 100.

<sup>30</sup> Symons, *The Symbolist Movement in Literature* (1899), p. vi.

The doctrine of Mysticism, with which all this symbolical literature has so much to do, of which it is all so much the expression, presents us, not with a guide for conduct, not with a plan for our happiness, not with an explanation of any mystery, but with a theory of life which makes us familiar with mystery, and which seems to harmonise those instincts which make for religion, passion, and art, freeing us at once of a great bondage [...] On this theory alone does all life become worth living, all art worth making, all worship worth offering.<sup>31</sup>

Here Symons was foreshadowing a pivotal element in Michael Field's later embrace of Spanish mysticism: it is a 'theory of life' that enables those who follow it to free themselves 'of a great bondage'. For Decadent Catholics, mysticism was, indeed, a liberating experience which allowed unusual aesthetic practices, ritual, artifice and worship to coexist simultaneously. The realm of ritual, artistic, mystical and religious experience existed beyond the depersonalising effects of the (Bataillean) homogeneous social order.<sup>32</sup>

Of the Christian mystics, Symons became particularly interested in the sixteenth-century Spanish mystics, mostly because they expressed their religious beliefs through a symbolic and highly erotic poetic language. Symons was acquainted with Spanish mysticism through the poet Coventry Patmore (1823–1896) since 1890, but his active engagement with these mystic poets began in 1898, during the second trip to Spain analysed in the third chapter of this thesis.<sup>33</sup> In *Figures of Several Centuries* (1916) Symons recalled how during that trip he came 'upon a copy of the first edition of [St John of the Cross's] *Obras Espirituales* [*Spiritual Canticle*] [...]

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<sup>31</sup> Symons, *The Symbolist Movement in Literature* (1899), pp. 174–75.

<sup>32</sup> See Bataille, 'The Sacred', in *Visions of Excess*, pp. 240–45.

<sup>33</sup> In an essay on Patmore included in *Figures of Several Centuries* (1916), Symons wrote: 'It was he [Patmore], who first talked to me of St John of the Cross, and when eight years later, at Seville, I came upon a copy of the first edition of the *Obras Espirituales* in a stall of old books in Sierpes and began to read, and to try to render in English that extraordinary verse which remains, with that of S. Teresa, the finest lyrical verse which Spain has produced, I understood how much the mystic of the prose and poetry of *The Unknown Eros* owed to the *Noche Escura* and the *Llama de Amor Viva*. He spoke of the Catholic mystics like an explorer who had returned from the perils of far countries, with a remembering delight which he can share with few.' Arthur Symons, 'Coventry Patmore', *Figures of Several Centuries* (New York: E.P. Dutton, 1916), p. 361.

and began to read, and to try to render in English, that extraordinary verse which remains, with that of S. Teresa, the finest lyrical verse which Spain has produced.<sup>34</sup> In 1899, he would publish a scholarly essay on the poetry of the Spanish mystics in the *Contemporary Review*, which he would later include in his volume of essays *Cities and Sea-Coasts and Islands* (1918).

Both Symons' critical essay on the Spanish mystics and his *Symbolist Movement in Literature* were conceived during his second trip to Spain and published in the same year, 1899, and both movements were clearly linked by Symons in concept and conception. In his essay on the mystics, Symons described the poetry of St John of the Cross as 'metaphysical fire, a sort of white heat in which the abstract, the almost negative, becomes ecstatically realised by the senses.'<sup>35</sup> With St John of the Cross, he concluded, 'the negation of all earthly things, of the earthly senses even [...] This rapture of negation becomes poetry, and poetry of the highest order'.<sup>36</sup> These affirmations echo Symons' description of Symbolism, which is 'an attempt to spiritualise literature, to evade the old bondage of rhetoric, the old bondage of exteriority [...] to disengage the ultimate essence, the soul, of whatever exists and can be realised by the consciousness'.<sup>37</sup> For Symons, both sixteenth-century Spanish mysticism and late nineteenth-century European Symbolism are spiritual and liberating exercises of language, in search of an ideal state of the immaterial.

Symons' description of St John of the Cross's poetry in particular mirrors that of Verlaine's work. Symons notoriously defined the poetry of Verlaine as being able 'To fix the last fine shade, the quintessence of things; to fix it fleetingly; to be a

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<sup>34</sup> Symons, 'Coventry Patmore', p. 361.

<sup>35</sup> Symons, 'The Poetry of Santa Teresa and San Juan de la Cruz', p. 67.

<sup>36</sup> Symons, 'The Poetry of Santa Teresa and San Juan de la Cruz', p. 70.

<sup>37</sup> Symons, *The Symbolist Movement in Literature* (1899), pp. 9–10.

disembodied voice, and yet the voice of a human soul.’<sup>38</sup> Likewise, Symons wrote, St John of the Cross encouraged us to leave the soul free, and ‘in this soul, in which now no appetite abides, nor other imaginings, nor forms of other created things; most secretly it abides in so much the more inner interior.’<sup>39</sup> And he managed to convey this message using a ‘really sincere, really personal, lyric poetry’ — the voice of a human soul.<sup>40</sup>

Alongside formal simplicity — the mystical rejection of all rhetoric — Symons stressed the erotic language of the Spanish mystics, particularly in St John of the Cross’s *Spiritual Canticle* (1578–1584). For Symons, the erotic excess of this work refused to acknowledge any boundaries. Symons found the *Spiritual Canticle*

almost ludicrous in the liveliness of its natural images, as when the Spouse drinks in the ‘interior bodega’ [inner wine cellar] of the Beloved, has a peculiar fragrance, as of very strong natural perfumes, perfumes really made honestly out of flowers, though in the fieriest of alcohols. Here [...] there is an abandonment to all the sensations of love, which seems to me to exceed, and on their own ground, in directness and intensity of spiritual and passionate longing, most of what has been written by the love-poets of all ages. These lines, so full of rich and strange beauty, ache with desire and with all the subtlety of desire. They analyse the sensations of the soul, as lovers do, that they may draw out their sweetness more luxuriously.<sup>41</sup>

What intrigued Symons, then, was that St John of the Cross did not simply write love poetry, but explicitly erotic love poetry. Symons interpreted St John’s poetry as an image evocative of sexual ecstasy; the ‘inner wine cellar’ that smells of flowers and alcohol is unapologetically suggestive of the female genitalia. In addition, as he did with flamenco and with other manifestations of Spanish culture discussed in my third chapter, Symons linked the pleasure obtained by reading St John of the Cross with a

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<sup>38</sup> Symons, ‘The Decadent Movement in Literature’, p. 862.

<sup>39</sup> Symons, ‘The Poetry of Santa Teresa and San Juan de la Cruz’, p. 70.

<sup>40</sup> Symons, ‘The Poetry of Santa Teresa and San Juan de la Cruz’, p. 64.

<sup>41</sup> Symons, ‘The Poetry of Santa Teresa and San Juan de la Cruz’, p. 71.

painful sensation; the lines literally ‘ache with desire’. The agony and ecstasy that St John of the Cross obtains in his union with God became, for Symons, a human agony and ecstasy in the union with the (human) lover.

Symons’ understanding of St John of the Cross’s work thus anticipates Bataille’s conception of the Spanish mystic: ‘according to John of the Cross, we must imitate in God (Jesus) the fall from grace, the agony, the moment of “no-knowledge” [...] the despair of God [...] The agony of God in the person of man is fatal — it is the abyss into which vertigo tempted him to fall.’<sup>42</sup> As Symons, who understood that for St John of the Cross God can ‘be apprehended mentally only through a series of negations’, Bataille interprets St John of the Cross as dramatising the extreme limit, in accordance with the desire to die, to experience finitude — the supreme negation.<sup>43</sup>

For Symons, St Teresa also displays that extreme combination of pleasure attained through pain; within St Teresa there is a ‘flaming heart’ that ‘burns outward to escape the intolerable pain of its reclusion.’<sup>44</sup> This excess of both pleasure and agony is replicated by Symons in his descriptions of the female saint, offering a never-ending enumeration of vivid language to praise her poems: ‘impetuous, incorrect, full of joyous life, almost of hilarity’, ‘ardent, joyous simplicity [...] impassioned devotion’.<sup>45</sup>

Symons also retained the excess of the mystics’ language in his translations: two poems by St John of the Cross and four by St Teresa, included in his volume of verse *Images of Good and Evil* (1899). Symons made a literal, line-by-line translation of all the mystics’ works, masterly in keeping the arrangement and repetition of

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<sup>42</sup> Georges Bataille, *Inner Experience*, trans. by Leslie Anne Boldt (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1988), p. 47. *Inner Experience* was originally published as *L’expérience intérieure* in 1954.

<sup>43</sup> Symons, ‘The Poetry of Santa Teresa and San Juan de la Cruz’, p. 71.

<sup>44</sup> Symons, ‘The Poetry of Santa Teresa and San Juan de la Cruz’, p. 81.

<sup>45</sup> Symons, ‘The Poetry of Santa Teresa and San Juan de la Cruz’, pp. 74–81.

rhymes, and, crucially, all the ‘fire’ of the language. The previous English translations of some of these poems had been undertaken by priests, more interested in transmitting the content over the form. In 1864, for example, the priest David Lewis translated the first stanza of St John of the Cross’s poem ‘The Dark Night of the Soul’ as follows:

In a dark night,  
With anxious love inflamed,  
O, happy lot!  
Forth unobserved I went,  
My house being now at rest.<sup>46</sup>

The same stanza is very differently interpreted by Symons:

Upon an obscure night,  
Fevered with love in love’s anxiety,  
(O hapless-happy plight!)  
I went, none seeing me,  
Forth from my house where all things quiet be.<sup>47</sup>

In Lewis’ version, the mysterious beauty and passion of the original are gone, while Symons managed to produce a newly living poem that approximates the incandescent imagery of St John of the Cross. The repetition in the line ‘fevered with love in love’s anxiety’ evokes the mystical urgency of St John of the Cross. Likewise, the syllabic alliteration in ‘hapless-happy’ also contributes to the textual complexity and intensity of the original. In 1928 T.S. Eliot praised Symons’ translations of Baudelaire because in them the French poet became a British poet of the nineties, which he meant as a

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<sup>46</sup> St John of the Cross, *The Complete Works of Saint John of the Cross, of the Order of Our Lady of Mount Carmel*, trans. by David Lewis, 2 vols (London: Longman, Green, Longman, Roberts and Green, 1864) i, p.1. Original in Spanish:

En una noche oscura,  
con ansias, en amores inflamada,  
¡oh dichosa ventura!  
salí sin ser notada,  
estando ya mi casa sosegada.

<sup>47</sup> Symons, ‘The Poetry of Santa Teresa and San Juan de la Cruz’, p. 67.

‘very high compliment’; as he said, ‘the work of the translation is to make something foreign, or something remote in time, live with our own life’.<sup>48</sup> Symons’ accomplishment with the Spanish mystic poem is similar: St John of the Cross becomes, with Symons, a British Decadent, and Symbolist poet.

Not surprisingly, many of the poems Symons included in the volume in which all the mystics’ translations appeared, *Images of Good and Evil*, are replete with references to the symbolism and eroticism of St John of the Cross and St Teresa. ‘Laus Mortis’, for instance, is consciously derivative of ‘The Dark Night of the Soul’. Symons’ last lines echo the nothingness that remains in the last lines of St John of the Cross’s poem:

My soul that looks upon thy face and unders-  
tands,  
My throbbing heart that at thy touch is  
quieted,  
And all that once desired, and all desire now  
dead<sup>49</sup>

Heart and desire ‘are now dead’ in Symons’ poem, as all the senses ‘died’ in St John of the Cross’s verse:

And in my body all my senses died,  
All things I then forgot,  
My cheek on him who for my coming came;  
All ceased, and I was not.<sup>50</sup>

As with many other non-convert Decadents, the adaptation of religious elements in

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<sup>48</sup> T.S. Eliot ‘Baudelaire in our Time’, *For Lancelot Andrewes: Essays on Style and Order* (London: Faber and Gwyer, 1928), p. 93.

<sup>49</sup> Arthur Symons, ‘Laus Mortis’, *Images of Good and Evil* (London: William Heinemann, 1899), pp. 131–32.

<sup>50</sup> This is part of Symons’ translation of St John of the Cross’s ‘The Obscure Night of the Soul’, included in his article ‘The Poetry of Santa Teresa and San Juan de la Cruz’ (1899) and in his volume of poems *Images of Good and Evil* (1899).

Symons' poetry is not just a mannered or bizarre pose, but an attempt to express a new spirituality through the inversion of orthodox beliefs. In 'Laus Mortis' such unorthodox religious ideas inform Symons' conception of death as a maternal, divine woman that he likens to St John of the Cross's 'bride-soul' and to the Virgin Mary herself. Symons used a similar technique in the poem 'Mater Lilium' — mother lily in Latin, a repeated title for the Virgin Mary. This piece is Symons' most overt response to the 'Dark Night of the Soul'. As in the 'Dark Night of the Soul', which narrates the nocturnal journey of the soul from its bodily home to its union with God, 'Mater Lilium' describes an existential journey of the soul, beginning in the 'hours of night' and ending 'when the dark hours begin to wake.'<sup>51</sup>

Throughout the piece, Symons is in dialogue with the last two lines of St John of the Cross's poem, when the soul is finally free and able to leave all its 'cares and shame / Among the lilies, and forgetting them.'<sup>52</sup> In 'Mater Lilium', Symons begs those lilies to pity the soul, which is lost again in the hours of night. The line 'mother of lilies, pity me!', embedded in 'Mater Lilium', seems also a replica of the line in 'The Dark Night of the Soul', '(O hapless-happy plight!)', which St John of the Cross repeats twice in the poem.<sup>53</sup> In the end, this 'Mater Lilium', who may be the Virgin

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<sup>51</sup> Arthur Symons, 'Mater Lilium', *Images of Good and Evil* (London: William Heinemann, 1899), pp. 91–92.

<sup>52</sup> This is part of Symons' translation of St John of the Cross's 'The Obscure Night of the Soul', included in his article 'The Poetry of Santa Teresa and San Juan de la Cruz' (1899) and in his volume of poems *Images of Good and Evil* (1899).

<sup>53</sup> Extract from Symons' translation of St John's original poem, included in his article 'The Poetry of Santa Teresa and San Juan de la Cruz' (1899) and in his volume of poems *Images of Good and Evil* (1899):

Upon an obscure night,  
Fevered with love in love's anxiety,  
(O hapless-happy plight!)  
I went, none seeing me,  
Forth from my house where all things quiet be.

By night, secure from sight,  
And by the secret stair, disguisedly,  
(O hapless-happy plight!)



Mary or a virginal woman, displays Symons' preference in this instance for the Madonna as the ideal female: the conception that the mythical woman of his poems has been individually created by God or is herself divine in nature.

This symbolic language of Spanish mystic poetry — the negation of the senses, the virginal lilies — thus served Symons to articulate some of his more important critical and poetical work of the late 1890s. The philosophy of Spanish mysticism, and particularly that which imbued 'The Dark Night of the Soul', enabled him to redefine his Symbolist ideas, while the erotic quality of Spanish mystic poetry itself informed the sensuality of his quasi-religious poems of 1899. For Symons, Symbolist poetry could not have 'the old bondage of rhetoric'; simplicity of style was indispensable.<sup>54</sup> His own poetry, as discussed in the third chapter of this thesis, aimed to be a reflection of these ideals: his poetic style was generally lucid and direct, with a colloquial tone. And the poetry of 'the Spaniard, with that something abrupt, nervous, which there is in him' and which 'is singularly well able to condense emotion into brief form', offered thus an unsurpassable example to imitate.<sup>55</sup> Spanish mystic poetry contained what Symons called 'metaphysical fire': the ecstasy that strove to find immediate, not mediated, words for its revelation, and which was essential, too, for Symbolist poetry.

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By night, and privily,  
Forth from my house where all things quiet be.

And an extract from Symons' poem 'Mater Liliū', included in *Images of Good and Evil* (1899):

In the remembering hours of night,  
When the fierce-hearted winds complain,  
The trouble comes into my sight,  
And the voices come again,  
And the voices come again.

I see the tall white lilies bloom,  
(Mother of lilies, pity me!)  
The voice of lilies in the room  
(Mother of lilies, pity me!)  
Crying, crying silently.

<sup>54</sup> Symons, *The Symbolist Movement in Literature* (1899), p. 9.

<sup>55</sup> Symons, 'The Poetry of Santa Teresa and San Juan de la Cruz', p. 66.

### Homoerotic Mysticism, Catholic Decadence

The same metaphysical fire and ecstasy that allowed Symons to articulate his own Symbolist work and new spirituality, and which he found in Spanish mystic poetry, would later serve Michael Field to express their bodily desires within a religious framework. Katharine Bradley and Edith Cooper decided to enter the Roman Catholic Church in 1907 in response to a series of events, such as Cooper's frequent illnesses, but mainly due to the death of their beloved dog Whym Chow in 1906, which prompted a spiritual crisis. One of the crucial dilemmas they faced after their conversion was how to reconcile their love for each other and their art with their Catholic life. Spanish mysticism's aesthetics of extremes — spirituality and sensuality — acted as a catalyst for Michael Field's new faith and served to resolve that conundrum.

In 1922 Mary Sturgeon already noted how after Michael Field's Catholic conversion in 1907, their minds were 'possessed by the exaltation of the mystic'.<sup>56</sup> Bradley's choice of title for the volume of Catholic verse *Mystic Trees* (1913) clearly defined hers and Cooper's mystical inclinations. Michael Field's poetry appeared in the first *Oxford Book of English Mystical Verse*, published in 1916.<sup>57</sup> Yet critics have not examined Michael Field's relation to mystical theology in depth, probably based on earlier assumptions about the quality of their Catholic verse. The last decade, however, has seen scholars like Marion Thain (2000, 2007), Frederick S. Roden (2002) and Thain and Ana Parejo Vadillo (2009) challenge the assertion that Michael Field's Catholic verse — namely *Poems of Adoration* (1912), *Mystic Trees* (1913),

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<sup>56</sup> Mary Sturgeon, *Michael Field* (London: George G. Harrap, 1922), p. 197.

<sup>57</sup> Michael Field's poems 'Midsummer Night's Dream' and 'Were the Blessed Feet Have Trod' were included in *The Oxford Book of English Mystical Verse*, ed. by D.H.S. Nicholson and A.H.E. Lee (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1916), pp. 555–56.

*Whym Chow: Flame of Love* (1914) and *The Wattlefold* (1930) — is inherently less valuable than their previous work. For Roden, Field's late work demonstrates 'not the triviality of Decadent Christianity [...] but its rich space for imaginative, and in fact spiritual, satisfaction.'<sup>58</sup> Thain emphasises the dialectic between religion and sexuality, which 'produces a dynamic as exhilarating as that found in their earlier work.'<sup>59</sup> It is in the construction of this dialectic between religion and sexuality, alongside excess and intensity of expression, that Spanish mystic poetry played a central role for Michael Field.

An awareness of Michael Field's association with the female figure of St Teresa is also crucial in order to broaden understanding of the relationships between Decadence, Modernism, Catholicism, and female homosexuality, as her work offers explicit readings of same-sex desire. Roden suggests that Cooper and Bradley can be placed at the beginning of a continuum of modern lesbian Catholicism, an affirmation to which, I would add, St Teresa proves instrumental. It is not coincidental that Vita Sackville-West, lover of Virginia Woolf, and Gertrude Stein would install St Teresa in 'the gallery of twentieth-century lesbian icons.'<sup>60</sup>

This next part of the chapter thus focuses on the importance of Spanish mystic doctrine — firstly that of St John and then that of St Teresa — for Michael Field's personal life and in their work, by analysing allusions to the mystics in their

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<sup>58</sup> Frederick S. Roden, *Same-Sex Desire in Victorian Religious Culture* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2002), p. 224.

<sup>59</sup> Marion Thain, "'Damnably Aestheticism' and the Turn to Rome: John Gray, Michael Field, and a Poetics of Conversion', in *The Fin-de-Siècle Poem: English Literary Culture and the 1890s*, ed. by Joseph Bristow (Athens: Ohio University Press, 2005), p. 313.

<sup>60</sup> Corinne E. Blackmer, 'The Ecstasies of Saint Teresa: The Saint as Queer Diva from Crashaw to *Four Saints in Three Acts*', in *En Travesti: Women, Gender Subversion, Opera*, ed. by Corinne E. Blackmer and Patricia Juliana Smith (New York: Columbia University Press, 1995), p. 326. Blackmer argues that for queer twentieth-century artists, such as Vita Sackville-West and Gertrude Stein, among others, St Teresa became a lesbian icon, a figure of societal, artistic and sexual transgression. Sackville-West wrote a dual biography of St Teresa of Ávila and St Thérèse of Lisieux entitled *The Eagle and The Dove* (1943), in which she associates the figure of St Teresa with Sappho and hints at lesbian practices. Stein wrote the libretto for the opera *Four Saints in Three Acts* (1934), which features St Teresa.

correspondence and mutual diary in the period 1907–1914. I also illustrate how the traditional Spanish mystic diction and verse form are also present in Michael Field's poetry of conversion, particularly in *Poems of Adoration* and *Mystic Trees*. The latter was almost entirely written by Bradley, and the former mainly by Cooper, which testifies, as Thain and Parejo Vadillo note, 'the greater distance between the two women that religion established.'<sup>61</sup> At the same time, however, these two volumes together 'form the major collaborative work of the period: they were designed as counterparts, which would form a complete whole when united with the specially made black leather strap.'<sup>62</sup> As this section shows, the presence of Spanish mysticism seems to be more evident in Bradley's *Mystic Trees*, but it is also distinctly noticeable in Cooper's *Poems of Adoration*. The letters examined here were all written by Bradley, but she claimed to write also in name of Cooper. There seems thus to be a clear unity in their understanding and absorption of Spanish mysticism, which was differently translated into written form.

This part of the chapter pays particular attention to six works by St John and St Teresa of special relevance to Michael Field. These works have, however, passed relatively unnoticed. Michael Field's direct allusion to St John's *The Living Flame of Love* (1585–1587) in *Whym Chow: Flame of Love*, and its significance, has already been noted by scholars.<sup>63</sup> Yet other works of St John that are referred to throughout Michael Field's later poems have been hardly acknowledged, particularly the *Spiritual Canticle* (1578–1584), the *Ascent of Mount Carmel* (1579–1585) and *The Dark Night* (1582–1585). Nor have the numerous references to St Teresa's poems and prose works

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<sup>61</sup> Michael Field, *Michael Field, the Poet: Published and Manuscript Materials*, ed. Marion Thain and Ana Parejo Vadillo (Peterborough: Broadview Press, 2009), p. 161.

<sup>62</sup> Michael Field, *Michael Field, the Poet*, p. 161.

<sup>63</sup> See Roden (2002); Thain (2005, 2007, 2009); and Camille Cauti, 'Michael Field's Pagan Catholicism', in *Michael Field and Their World*, ed. by Margaret D. Stetz and Cheryl A. Wilson (High Wycombe: Rivendale Press, 2007).

*Life* (1562–1565), *The Way to Perfection* (1566–1567), and *The Interior Castle* (1577) been properly considered.

### **‘Sensually and spiritually’: John Gray and St John of the Cross**

As mentioned above, one of the crucial dilemmas that Michael Field faced after their conversion was how to reconcile their art with their Catholic life. In entries by Cooper in Michael Field’s mutual diary, there are passages of conversations with Father Vincent MacNab, Bradley’s confessor, which reflect these difficulties. ‘What is a dramatic poet to do, who, receiving Christ corporeally each day, must needs deal with sinners and become, as Matthew Arnold says, “what we sing,”’ recorded Cooper.<sup>64</sup> The priest’s answer pointed towards a clear path, mysticism: ‘The poets are the mystics — they lead the way to revelation — [...] The Church welcomes poets. Heaven is full of song. But there will always be the delicate question with you, what you must bear for your art, as Christ bore sin, and what must be rejected in your material.’<sup>65</sup> The answer to this ‘delicate question’ came through the figure of John Gray (1866–1934) and, I propose, through Spanish mysticism.

Gray, one of the main representatives of the Decadent poetry of the nineties, had become a Catholic priest in 1901. For most of his life, he had a relationship with the poet and theorist of homosexuality André Raffalovich (1864–1934), who had converted in 1896. Given their similarities, it is not surprising that after Michael Field’s conversion, Gray became a close friend and confessor, and helped them to cope with their transition from *fin-de-siècle* poets to Catholic converts.<sup>66</sup> As Thain

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<sup>64</sup> Michael Field, *Works and Days*, p. 313.

<sup>65</sup> Michael Field, *Works and Days*, p. 314.

<sup>66</sup> For a more detailed account of the relationship between Gray and Michael Field see, for example, Roden (2002) and Thain (2005, 2007).

claims, ‘in providing them with his own most comforting elements of doctrine, he gave Bradley and Cooper the theological tools and framework [...] to accomplish their own reconciliation of their perverse, pagan poetic past (and their desire for each other) with their newly found Catholic faith.’<sup>67</sup> When Gray became Michael Field’s confessor, they were indeed actively seeking role models, as the following words that Bradley wrote to Gray in the spring of 1907 testify:

& there are no frankly Christian poets? [...]  
I fear Oscar is right — the real Catholic poet is Verlaine?

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And might there be a fresh poetry — interpreting, painting the great mystery — we say Ave Maria stupidly — while we are far from our lips — if the lips could a little say the truth?<sup>68</sup>

John Gray, then, gave the women some answers: he fervently encouraged Michael Field to read St Teresa and St John the Cross, his most esteemed religious figure and one of the most homoerotic of Catholic writers. With time, St John’s work would prove to be as important to Field as it had been to Gray: ‘How I thank God for you — first of all that you made me a Catholic, & then the good method — St John of the Cross. When, & how did you first draw him into my life? How bitter he was to me! Choose “the most afflictive way” [...] — I need him.’<sup>69</sup> Their mutual understanding of the words of St John of the Cross went at times beyond language. For Gray, St John’s ‘love of God produces a literary quality in his expressions. I must have seen in reading him (without understanding one word) that Sion [*sic*] is a high hill; and (you know what a fool a poet is) started getting up it. Or he stuck out a finger from heaven

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<sup>67</sup> Marion Thain, *‘Michael Field’: Poetry, Aestheticism and the Fin de Siècle* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), p. 171.

<sup>68</sup> Michael Field, *Michael Field, the Poet*, p. 339.

<sup>69</sup> Katharine Bradley to John Gray, [1911], Richmond, National Library of Scotland, Gray & Raffalovich, Dep. 372, N20, fol. 28.

or from Spain — and a child, prehensile, simian, grasped it & got lugged along.’<sup>70</sup>

Equally, Bradley praised St John for ‘what I insist on calling his glorious English!’<sup>71</sup>

It seems almost impossible to avoid drawing parallels between these two Spanish mystics and their ‘English counterparts’. Indeed, the two most important figures of Spanish mysticism forged a close friendship and partnership, which is echoed by that between John Gray and Michael Field. St Teresa acted as a mentor figure to St John, while the reverse was true in the case of Michael Field–Gray. All of them were Catholic poets, yet outcasts and rebels in search of new forms of expression — and just as the homosexuals and former Decadents Gray and Michael Field had been condemned, St Teresa and St John were persecuted by the Inquisition for their unusual approach to religion.

The correspondence between Gray and Bradley (Bradley claimed to write also in the name of Cooper) after 1907 testifies the importance of St John first for the former and then for the latter. Even before Gray had encouraged her reading of St John, Bradley had revealed her preference for the Spanish religious school. In an undated but *c.* 1907 letter, Bradley writes to Gray: ‘I plunged myself into the Spanish school — when in Ireland — the Spiritual Exercises of S. Ignatius of Loyola [...] the Lover in S. Ignatius! The Lover that gives him genius! My soul leans back against these sentences!’<sup>72</sup> Bradley was already highlighting the main notion present in

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<sup>70</sup> John Gray to Katharine Bradley, 24 October 1908, Edinburgh, quoted in Peter J. Vernon, ‘The Letters of John Gray’ (unpublished doctoral thesis, University of London, 1976), p. 280.

<sup>71</sup> Bradley to Gray, [no date], Richmond, National Library of Scotland, Gray & Raffalovich, Dep. 372, N17.

<sup>72</sup> Bradley to Gray, [1907], Richmond, National Library of Scotland, Gray & Raffalovich, Dep. 372, N17, fol. 34. Bradley wrote down the ‘sentences’ below, which were part of Saint Ignatius of Loyola’s *Spiritual Exercises* (1548):

‘1. Recollection of Spirit is an habitual exercise of the intellect & the will, by which man believes that God is always present & loves him.’

2. Consider the happiness of Jesus in his resurrection.

3. There is no perfection in God, & no person in the most Holy Trinity that does not entertain for you an infinite love.’

Spanish mysticism that would incessantly draw her to it in the following years: Love. The title of the book that Michael Field published a few years after writing these words, *Mystic Trees*, was Bradley's homage to the Spanish school. Already in 1911, Cooper revealed the title's source: 'The great joy is that our Lady has given Michael a title for her Catholic Poems from an old Spanish hymn Mystic Trees. [...] Not only is this a title: it is an incentive. So perfect is its appeal that my Michael is enlarged in the hope of the imagination, that is creative virtue! How I rejoice in Mystic Trees! I am jealous exceedingly. The title was actually given yesterday, but is realised by me today.'<sup>73</sup>

Through John Gray, Michael Field's affections moved from St Ignatius of Loyola (1491–1556), considered the first great Spanish mystic, towards the next generation of Spanish mysticism, St John of the Cross. In October 1908, Gray encouraged Bradley to read St John more fervently, whom he loved 'very much with a firm persuasion that I should now be in hell but for him.'<sup>74</sup> In November 1908 he lent Bradley the first volume of the 1864 *Complete Works of St John of the Cross* translated by David Lewis, mentioned above.<sup>75</sup> This work contained St John's two-part work *Ascent of Mount Carmel* (1579–1585) and *The Dark Night* (1582–1585), which comment on and explain his poem 'The Dark Night of the Soul' (1578–1581). Bradley's response to this volume was decidedly effusive:

Then of S. John of the Cross! Oh that I could read him with quiet heart! I send you 2 or 3 lines of translation or thought-reading [...] Father, what St John says about the substitution of Hope for Memory is vital to me — I cannot speak

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<sup>73</sup> Michael Field, *Works and Days*, British Library, Add. MS 46801, fol. 66v.

<sup>74</sup> Gray to Bradley, 24 October 1908, Edinburgh, quoted in Peter J. Vernon, 'The Letters of John Gray', p. 280.

<sup>75</sup> Michael Field relied on Lewis' volume, but they would have also been familiar with translations of St John by their contemporaries, such as John Gray, who translated several poems of St John of the Cross in *Spiritual Poems* (1896) and *The Blue Calendar* (1895–1897), and those by Arthur Symonds.



of the new life I am getting from St. John — perhaps this is best — not a drop of the precious emotion is wasted — it is all wanted for the Spirit to use.<sup>76</sup>

That translation or ‘thought-reading’ that she referred to was the short poem entitled ‘Aridity’, which she added to her letter to Gray and which she would later include in *Mystic Trees*. The poem reads as follows:

O Soul, canst thou not understand  
 thou art not left alone,  
 as a dog to howl & moan  
 His master’s absence; thou art as a book  
 Left in a room that He forsook,  
 a book of His dear choice  
 that, quiet, waiteth for His Hand,  
 that, quiet, waiteth for His eye,  
 that, quiet, waiteth for His voice.<sup>77</sup>

Bradley rewrites here some of the ideas of St John’s poem ‘The Dark Night of the Soul’. This poem narrates the journey of the soul from its bodily home to its union with God. The journey is called the ‘Dark Night’ because darkness represents the hardships the soul suffers in detachment from the world, and in reaching the light of its union with the Creator. St John wrote a treatise (*The Dark Night*) commenting on the poem, in which he explains that the dark night of the senses consists of an ‘aridity’ of the sensual appetite through which the soul is purified of desires. In the text, St John explains that

nothing remains in that aridity and detachment but an anxious desire to serve God [...] when by continual mortification the four passions of the soul are calmed, that is, joy, grief, hope, and fear, when the natural desires are lulled to sleep in our sensual nature by persistent aridities, when the senses and the

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<sup>76</sup> Michael Field, *Michael Field, the Poet*, p. 346.

<sup>77</sup> Michael Field, *Michael Field, the Poet*, p. 346.

interior powers of the soul cease to be active [...] then the liberty of the spirit is unassailable by these enemies and the house remains calm and tranquil.<sup>78</sup>

St John of the Cross's concept of 'aridity' thus helped Bradley not only to address Whym Chow's death in 1906, but also her own mundane and bodily concerns and losses — the 'passions of the soul' — such as Cooper's various illnesses and eventual cancer (diagnosed in 1911) and her necessary celibacy as a result of their conversion.<sup>79</sup> Cooper would also find refuge in the dark night metaphor to alleviate the intense pain she was suffering due to her illness. In the poem 'Holy Cross', she wrote:

My clasp is filled, my sight receives  
The compass of its power; pain grieves  
About each sense but as a languid hum:  
And, out of weariness, at length,  
My day rejoices in its strength,  
My night that innocence of strife is come.<sup>80</sup>

Above all, the 'dark night' offered Michael Field a necessary metaphor of spiritual yet earthly love: 'Then St. John of the Cross speaks to me — "the difference is that in the next world they are purified by fire, & here, purified & enlightened by love." I am happy [...] on the green pastures now I have found St. John of the Cross.'<sup>81</sup> Bradley was quoting here an extract of the *The Dark Night*, in which St John refers to 'the dark night of loving fire' which 'purifies in the darkness.'<sup>82</sup> St John's emphasis that love

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<sup>78</sup> St John of the Cross, *The Dark Night of the Soul*, ed. by Benedict Zimmerman, trans. by David Lewis, (London: T. Baker, 1908), pp. 62–63.

<sup>79</sup> Cooper testifies to her post-conversion celibacy in *Works and Days*. In 1907 she wrote that, since converting, 'I have never fallen into fleshly sin'. In 1908 she added that 'When I came into this Church a year ago [I gave] a gift that was a vow of chastity', quoted in Chris White, "'Poets and lovers evermore": The Poetry and Journals of Michael Field', in *Sexual Sameness: Textual Differences in Lesbian and Gay Writing*, ed. by Joseph Bristow (London: Routledge, 1992), p. 40.

<sup>80</sup> Michael Field, 'Holy Cross', *Poems of Adoration* (London: Sands, 1912), p. 30.

<sup>81</sup> Bradley to Gray, [1913], Richmond, National Library of Scotland, Gray & Raffalovich, Dep. 372, N19, fol. 68.

<sup>82</sup> St John of the Cross, *The Dark Night of the Soul*, p. 118.

on earth is necessary to clean one's soul enabled Michael Field to reframe their 'indecent' relationship.

*The Ascent of Mount Carmel* (1579–1585), also based on St John's poem 'Dark Night of the Soul' and included in the volume lent by Gray, became equally crucial to Michael Field's conversion. This long treatise is structured around the idea of a spiritual ascent that can be undertaken only after purgation. In this volume, Field found further mystical ways to purge their pagan past, as it details the earthly and spiritual privations that the soul undergoes in search of union with God. As had happened with John Gray previously, St John was finally, with this volume, 'steadily quieting' Michael Field: 'at last I am learning to take the slow ways of God with gratitude & to have faith. He will do all for me, if I will but give Him time.'<sup>83</sup> The most important doctrine extracted from that work came from a chapter in Book Two, which Bradley copied in the first page of Michael Field's 1911 diary (with two sentences underlined):

Christ annihilated himself at the Cross:  
Therefore it is that the Psalmist saith of Him,  
"I am brought to nothing, & I knew not."  
This is for the instruction of the truly spiritual  
man in the mystery of the gate & way of Christ,  
that he may become united with God, & also  
to teach him that the more he annihilates  
self for God, in sense & spirit, the more will  
he be united with God, and the greater the  
work he will accomplish. And when  
he shall have been brought to nothing, when  
his humility is perfect, then will take place  
the unity of the soul & God, which is  
the highest & noblest estate attainable in  
this life. This consisteth not in  
spiritual refreshments, sweetness,  
or sentiments, but in the living death  
of the cross, sensually & spiritually,  
outwardly & inwardly.<sup>84</sup>

<sup>83</sup> Bradley to Gray, [no date], Richmond, National Library of Scotland, Gray & Raffalovich, Dep. 372, N17.

<sup>84</sup> Michael Field, *Works and Days*, British Library, Add. MS 46801, fol. 2v.

In this extract, St John stresses how detached and unencumbered must be the soul of those who will walk in eternal life. Awareness of the senses is equally necessary for the illumination the soul, as is acceptance of pain and grief. As a result, under the influence of this book, Bradley finally ‘became quiet’; in other words, St John’s doctrine provided her with solace.<sup>85</sup> This notion only intensified as Michael Field continued to read other works by St John of the Cross. After their revelatory experience with the *Dark Night of the Soul* and *Ascent of Mount Carmel*, Bradley asked Gray for translations of St John’s *Spiritual Canticle* (1578–1584), writing, ‘It is life to have access to the Spiritual Canticle.’<sup>86</sup> ‘[It] is my first experience of a book in the ~~Catholic~~ (o forgive!) Church’, she joked.<sup>87</sup> The sensual symbolism and imagery of this book so attracted Michael Field that they emulated it in some of their verse. In ‘Words of the Bridegroom’, Cooper writes:

Fragrance to Me of lily-fields;  
How shall ye keep the whiteness of your vow?  
My Virgins, My white Brides, I whisper how:  
Of Virgin flesh, a Virgin God,  
Incarnate among men I trod;  
And when as Bread they feed on Me  
Needs must that Bread be of Virginity.  
Feed at My altar, My white Doves,  
Feed on the Bread My Mother loves!<sup>88</sup>

In this poem, Cooper draws on almost the same linguistic resources as St John of the Cross in his *Spiritual Canticle*, but remodels them to fit her own interests. In *Spiritual*

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<sup>85</sup> Bradley to Gray, [23 November 1908], Richmond, National Library of Scotland, Gray & Raffalovich, Dep. 372, N18, fol. 15.

<sup>86</sup> Bradley to Gray, [1909], Richmond, National Library of Scotland, Gray & Raffalovich, Dep. 372, N17.

<sup>87</sup> Bradley to Gray, [no date], Richmond, National Library of Scotland, Gray & Raffalovich, Dep. 372, N17.

<sup>88</sup> Michael Field, ‘Words of the Bridegroom’, *Poems of Adoration* (London: Sands, 1912), p. 93.

*Canticle*, St John attempts to explain the mystical process that follows the soul until it reaches its union with God through the Song of Songs' allegory: the search for the bridegroom (Christ) by the bride (the human soul). Cooper reinterprets this heterosexual allegory, transforming it into a poem of female same-sex desire. Portrayed as a merely human love these verses would have been perceived as perverse, but sanctified to divine virginal uses they serve their Godly purpose.

Michael Field also borrowed St John's imagery from his last work, *Living Flame of Love* (1585–1587). In *Whym Chow: Flame of Love* (published in 1914 but composed around 1907), Michael Field echoes St John's last work, which describes the state of the soul emerging from the dark night. To convey this complex state, St John appropriates the conventional language of courtly love, with flames of love, wounding, and suffering as a living death. It is the Holy Spirit that acts as a purgatorial flame in the soul. To Michael Field, their beloved dog, Whym Chow, represented the flame that reciprocates love fully, and the wound was the longing for ever-greater union. As Thain has convincingly argued, St John of the Cross's *Living Flame of Love* allowed Field to understand the loss of the dog as a necessary sacrifice, which brought them nearer to God.<sup>89</sup>

The doctrine, diction and imagery of St John thus helped Michael Field to develop their new spirituality. Likewise, St John's versification was also a formally enabling influence on Michael Field's poetry. In 'Fregit', for instance, Cooper gives a personal interpretation of a Spanish verse form popularised by St John of the Cross (and St Teresa), the *glosa*. This form consists of two parts: in the first, a few lines set

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<sup>89</sup> See Thain, "'Damnable Aestheticism' and the Turn to Rome: John Gray, Michael Field, and a Poetics of Conversion", pp. 327–31.

the theme for the entire poem, while the second is a gloss on or explanation of the text (my emphasis):

ON the night of dedication  
Of Thyself as our oblation,  
**Christ, Belovèd, Thou didst take**  
**In Thy very hands and break. . . .**

[...]  
Broken before him, as his sin's award.  
**These were broken; Thou didst break. . . .**

[...]  
Thy own Body for our sake:  
**Thy own Body Thou didst take**  
**In Thy holy hands — and break.<sup>90</sup>**

With this *glosa*, the poet, like the mystic, becomes a popular exegete of the Eucharistic notion of the “breaking of the bread”, the “fregit” of Christ’s body. In spite of this and a few other examples from *Poems of Adoration*, the Michael Field volume that better reproduces the Spanish mystic verse form is Bradley’s *Mystic Trees*. Spanish mystic poetry tends to condense emotion into brief forms, generally using short lines and stanzas, and these simple yet impassioned statements are also a constant in *Mystic Trees*. Bradley also uses a poetic form favoured by St John of the Cross in several of her poems: the five-line stanza, which is very rare in English poetry and is used in Spanish poetics to express deep emotions. ‘Annunciation Silence’ and ‘Caput tuum ut carmelus’, for instance, both contain reinterpretations of the *quintilla*, that is, a stanza of five lines that has nine or fewer syllables (a loose equivalent of the English iambic pentameter), in which there may not be more than two rhymes or two consecutive rhymes, and the stanza may not end with a couplet. By using this brief, intense verse

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<sup>90</sup> Michael Field, ‘Fregit’, *Poems of Adoration* (London: Sands, 1912), p. 5.

form, Bradley's poems display an equally concise and profound sentiment. If St John of the Cross' doctrine had become a crucial point of reference in Michael Field's new Catholic life, his distinctive diction, imagery and verse forms opened up new poetic paths of experimentation.

### **'O my Desire': St Teresa**

We have seen so far how St John became Michael Field and John Gray's shared saint, a Catholic and Decadent symbol of their poetic friendship: 'I have just been commemorating St. John of the Cross. What prayers for the dear Father! How indeed he was meant for us — our Saint', wrote Bradley to Gray.<sup>91</sup> The female figure of St Teresa, however, seems to have been kept almost exclusively for Michael Field. St Teresa does not appear as often as St John in their correspondence with John Gray. Yet the fact that Bradley exhorted St Teresa, and not St John, in her last hours, testifies the crucial role played by the female saint: 'Supposing God wishes me to leave all these Holy active Dominicans, & to find my rest at Wincanton Convent. St Theresa, I call on you to help'.<sup>92</sup> Bradley wrote these words on 16 September 1914 in the final page of the diary that she had shared for almost thirty years with Edith Cooper.<sup>93</sup> Bradley's allusion to this Carmelite convent and, more importantly, her exhortation to the Spanish Carmelite mystic St Teresa in her final days should not be overlooked. St John's metaphor of the dark night allowed Michael Field, as well as former Decadent Gray, to purge their past sins and gave them a Decadent frame for understanding their

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<sup>91</sup> Bradley to Gray, [1913], Richmond, National Library of Scotland, Gray & Raffalovich, Dep. 372, N19, fol. 16.

<sup>92</sup> Michael Field, *Works and Days*, British Library, Add. MS 46804, fol. 37v.

<sup>93</sup> Cooper had passed away nine months prior to this entry, on 13 December 1913, and Bradley would die ten days after it, on 26 September 1914.

new Catholic life. St Teresa's language of female ecstasy also served to explicate their new faith but, more importantly, it invigorated their religious poetry.

It is through St Teresa, I argue, that Michael Field were able to free themselves from their mentor, John Gray, and create a new religious, female-centred verse. The necessary 'quietness' that Field found through St John of the Cross in order to comprehend their newly converted status burst into fullness through St Teresa. 'As you would imagine S. Theresa absolutely is what I should Love to have been — orthodox, full of "fire" — blest with visions', wrote Bradley to Gray, after requesting volumes of works of the female saint.<sup>94</sup> If John Gray identified himself with the homoerotic figure of St John, Michael Field identified with St Teresa, the ecstatic woman saint. Around 1907, Bradley wrote to Gray mentioning a *Life of St Teresa* (1562–1565) that the poet-priest had lent her.<sup>95</sup> In likely allusion to that book, Bradley wrote again to Gray: 'Such delight I have in S. Teresa. I was about in my haste to apologise for cutting some of the leaves with a hair pin'.<sup>96</sup> Bradley seems to be embodying here St Teresa's ecstasy by making a playful analogy between the piercing of the book by her pin and St Teresa's piercing by an angel's arrow:

In his hands I saw a great golden spear, and at the end of the iron tip I seemed to see a point of fire. With this he seemed to pierce my heart several times so that it penetrated to my entrails. When he drew it out, I thought he was drawing them out with it and he left me completely afire with a great love for God. The pain was so sharp that it made me utter several moans; and so excessive was the sweetness caused me by this intense pain that one can never wish to lose it.<sup>97</sup>

<sup>94</sup> Bradley to Gray, [no date], Richmond, National Library of Scotland, Gray & Raffalovich, Dep. 372, N17.

<sup>95</sup> 'This life of S. Theresa — I find, examining it is sought in itself'. Bradley to Gray, [c. 1907], Richmond, National Library of Scotland, Gray & Raffalovich, Dep. 372, N17, fol. 18.

<sup>96</sup> Bradley to Gray, 15 September [1907], Richmond, National Library of Scotland, Gray & Raffalovich, Dep. 372, N20.

<sup>97</sup> St Teresa of Avila, *The Life of St Teresa of Avila*, trans. by E. Allison Peers (London: Sheed and Ward, 1979), pp. 192–93.



In this game of saintly self-identifications, Bradley's reference to the pin resembles Gray's correlation between a 'brown' volume by St John of the Cross and the 'brown' curtains of his bedchamber. On 20 January 1908, Gray wrote to Michael Field how he 'used to lie in bed, having at the time a brown eiderdown & brown curtains reading a brown book — works of St. John of the Cross'.<sup>98</sup> As Thain notes, St John seems, in this quotation, 'to be blended into the embracing environment of the bedchamber, enabling him to be equated with sensuous protection as well as being the means by which Gray is made exposed and vulnerable.'<sup>99</sup> Similarly, St Teresa's piercing serves Bradley as a dual tool to explore sensual and religious feelings. Thain has shown how Bradley and Cooper learnt from their male mentors, such as John Gray, about the erotic potential of the stigmata (particularly Christ's wounds) for reconciling earthly and transcendent desires: 'the use of Christ's body and his wounds as an erotic interface between Gray and his religion no doubt influenced Michael Field's work, but Bradley and Cooper concentrate particularly on the "hands" of Christ in order to imagine [...] a specifically female sexuality.'<sup>100</sup>

The clearest wound that Michael Field uses to express their own desire, I would add, is St Teresa's wounding of the heart. In 'Prophet', included in *Poems of Adoration*, we find the line 'How a sword shall pierce her heart alone', a clear allusion to a female wounded heart.<sup>101</sup> Less directly, but just as revealingly, in 'Viaticum' Cooper also replicates St Teresa's description of her ecstasy. The poem opens with these two lines, 'O Heart, that burns within / Illuminated, hot!' and closes

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<sup>98</sup> John Gray to 'Michael Field', quoted in Thain, "*Michael Field*": *Poetry, Aestheticism and the Fin de Siècle*, p. 193.

<sup>99</sup> Thain, "*Michael Field*": *Poetry, Aestheticism and the Fin de Siècle*, pp. 193–94.

<sup>100</sup> Thain, "*Michael Field*": *Poetry, Aestheticism and the Fin de Siècle*, p. 185.

<sup>101</sup> Michael Field, 'Prophet', *Poems of Adoration* (London: Sands, 1912), p. 64.

With Him who died for me,  
 Who breaking with me Bread,  
 Is known to me as Life,  
 Is felt by me as Fire;  
 Who is my way and all  
 My wayfaring's Desire.<sup>102</sup>

For Thain and Parejo Vadillo, poems such as 'Viaticum' show 'how religious fervour can translate wholly convincingly into poetic effusion for Cooper.'<sup>103</sup> This poetic effusion is successfully achieved through St Teresa's language of female ecstasy, which speaks of fire, and sweet desire.<sup>104</sup> In relation to this discursive intertwining of religion and sexuality, Joy Dixon, in the introduction to a special issue on the subject in the *Victorian Review* (2011), has explicated the ways in which recent studies have rejected repressive theories of late Victorian religion 'in favour of an emphasis on the complex ways in which sexuality is produced discursively'.<sup>105</sup> Michael Field's understanding of and engagement with St Teresa represents a prime example of the fruitful ways in which religion, and Catholicism in particular, served to express, rather than repress, female sexuality.

St Teresa's *transverberation* (the piercing of her heart by a dart) has fascinated artists and critics alike for centuries. Famously captured by Bernini in the seventeenth century, it was bluntly described in the 1970s by psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan: 'she's

<sup>102</sup> Michael Field, 'Viaticum', *Poems of Adoration* (London: Sands, 1912), pp. 106–07.

<sup>103</sup> Michael Field, *Michael Field, the Poet*, p. 161.

<sup>104</sup> Female language understood henceforth as *écriture féminine*, a theory developed by Hélène Cixous in 'The Laugh of the Medusa' (published originally in French in 1975). In this work, Cixous affirms that 'woman must write her self: must write about women and bring women to writing.' Hélène Cixous, 'The Laugh of the Medusa', *Signs*, 1 (1976), 875–893. Cixous herself identified with St Teresa and linked her figure with female transgression: 'I was Saint Teresa of Avila, that madwoman who knew a lot more than all the men. And who knew how to become a bird on the strength of loving.' Hélène Cixous and Catherine Clément, *The Newly Born Woman*, trans. by Betsy Wing (London: I.B. Tauris, 1996), p. 99.

<sup>105</sup> Joy Dixon, 'Introduction' to the Special Issue on Religion and Sexuality, *Victorian Review*, 37:2 (2011), 41–45 (p. 41).

coming. There's no doubt about it.'<sup>106</sup> Would Michael Field have interpreted St Teresa in a similar way? St Teresa's mystical experience involves sex, but it also involves God. The physicality of this event is undeniably vital, yet St Teresa alters bodily boundaries and uses them to enable love of God. As Constance M. Furey explains, St Teresa 'equates experiencing God with the exhilaration caused by seeing, touching, or being pierced by another. If this should not be "reduced" to sex, neither does it exclude sex.'<sup>107</sup> Mystical desire is, then, 'queer in its effects — exceeding and hyperbolizing its own conventionality.'<sup>108</sup> St Teresa's mystical sexuality and incarnational theology thus conveys all the paradoxes of Catholic Decadence and accepts that 'we are never wholly self-contained, never fully bounded, never fully in control of bodies or of language.'<sup>109</sup> In a similar vein, the body is constantly present in Michael Field's Catholic verse, but the body is 'not enough', as Bradley's poem 'The Homage of Death' testifies:

How willingly  
I yield to Thee  
This very dust!  
My body — that was not enough!

[...]

To yield Thee up my breath  
Were not enough of death;<sup>110</sup>

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<sup>106</sup> Jacques Lacan, *On Feminine Sexuality: The Limits of Love and Knowledge, Book XX: Encore 1972–1973*, trans. by Bruce Fink (New York: Norton, 1998), p. 76. Lacan was alluding to 'The Ecstasy of St Teresa', a marble and gilded niche sculpture by Gian Lorenzo Bernini (1645–52) located in Santa Maria della Vittoria in Rome.

<sup>107</sup> Constance M. Furey, 'Sexuality', in *The Cambridge Companion to Christian Mysticism*, ed. by Amy Hollywood and Patricia Z. Beckman (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), pp. 335–36.

<sup>108</sup> Karma Lochrie, 'Mystical Acts, Queer Tendencies', in *Constructing Medieval Sexuality*, ed. by Karma Lochrie, Peggy McCracken and James A. Schultz (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997), p. 183.

<sup>109</sup> Furey, p. 336.

<sup>110</sup> Michael Field, 'The Homage of Death', *Mystic Trees* (London: Eveleigh Nash, 1913), pp. 94–95.

In this poem, Bradley echoes St Teresa's lines (translated by Arthur Symons) 'Behold me here, sweet Love; [...] See here my heart, I lay it in thy hand; my body, my life and soul, my bowels and my love'.<sup>111</sup> For Michael Field, as for St Teresa, the sensual and spiritual spheres are inextricable in their verse:

Beloved, I give Thee all  
This Adam's Fall,  
This my desert —  
Thy Father would not let Thee see  
Corruption, but I give it Thee.  
Behold me thus abhorred,  
My penance, Lord!<sup>112</sup>

St Teresa's religious language of female desire thus permeates Michael Field's Catholic verse, inflecting it with Decadent qualities. Their verse is religious, but it speaks of an ambiguous desire, and its diction is often distinctively female: 'this Adam's Fall'. More fundamentally, for Michael Field St Teresa represents a crucial duality that neither St John of the Cross nor John Gray do: she is both female and queer. Over the last two decades, critics have convincingly argued how St Teresa's writings can be read, if not as openly homoerotic, then decidedly sexually ambiguous.<sup>113</sup> According to Corinne E. Blackmer, 'This mysterious female pleasure experienced by women mystics such as Teresa of Ávila [...] exceeds [...] heterosexuality and the symbolic order of masculine language'.<sup>114</sup> Paola Marín also claims that, in St Teresa's writing, it is possible 'to find an explicit "anti-straight" attitude in the sense that she puts at stake the paradigms of a social organization based

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<sup>111</sup> St Teresa of Avila, 'What would'st thou do with me?', trans. by Arthur Symons in 'The Poetry of Santa Teresa and San Juan de la Cruz', p. 81.

<sup>112</sup> Michael Field, 'The Homage of Death', p. 94.

<sup>113</sup> For more on St Teresa and her reputedly homoerotic attachments see Blackmer (1995) and Marín (1999).

<sup>114</sup> Blackmer, 'The Ecstasies of Saint Teresa: The Saint as Queer Diva from Crashaw to *Four Saints in Three Acts*', p. 308.

on heterosexuality — that is, a phallocentric regime.’<sup>115</sup> Drawing on Paul Julian Smith’s proposal that St Teresa’s visions could be seen as acts of disavowal, a refusal to internalise the phallic order, Marín claims that St Teresa’s *transverberation* could thus be read ‘not as a penetration by a ghostly phallus, but as a denial of sexual differences: indeed, the agent who holds the dart that enters her heart is a (sexless) angel.’<sup>116</sup>

St Teresa’s ambiguous female-male wound is thus central to Michael Field’s articulation of their equally ambiguous desire. In contrast to the patriarchal gender binary that defines sexual identities via the genitals, Marín proposes that mystical discourse is ‘queer and differs from courtly love, because it points toward the instability of sexual difference.’<sup>117</sup> This instability is clear, for instance, in St Teresa’s *Meditations on the Song of Songs* (1566–1571), in which she represents God simultaneously as husband and mother with divine breasts.<sup>118</sup> Michael Field’s persona and relationship are equally ambiguous. As Virginia Blain notes, ‘Although they played husband-wife games modelled on heterosexual marriage, it was only one of a range of intimacies available to them. In some respects, it could be argued that they modelled themselves after their idea of a same-sex male couple.’<sup>119</sup> More than with St John of the Cross, Michael Field could thus identify with the ambiguous femininity of St Teresa, a *female* religious figure who transgressed gender, sexual, and literary boundaries. When Julia Kristeva writes on St Teresa, she stresses the radical novelty of this transgression: ‘By the hand for the first time of a European woman, pleasure

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<sup>115</sup> Paola Marín, ‘Teresa de Ávila (Teresa de Jesús)’, in *Spanish Writers on Gay and Lesbian Themes: A Bio-Critical Sourcebook*, ed. by David William Foster (Westport: Greenwood, 1999), p. 161.

<sup>116</sup> Marín, p. 160.

<sup>117</sup> Marín, p. 160.

<sup>118</sup> St Teresa of Avila, *The Collected Works of St. Teresa of Avila*, trans. by Kieran Kavanaugh and Otilio Rodriguez, 3 vols (Washington: ICS, 1976–1985), II (1980), pp. 207–63, quoted in Paola Marín, ‘Teresa de Ávila’, p. 160.

<sup>119</sup> Virginia Blain, ‘“Michael Field, the Two-headed nightingale”: lesbian text as palimpsest’, *Women’s History Review* 5:2 (1996), 239–257 (p. 252).

unto death is conveyed with a sensual exactitude that defies decorum.’<sup>120</sup> St Teresa’s rebellious and sensual ‘exactitude’ is reflected in Michael Field’s poetry, and it also ‘defies decorum’; it is used to present female same-sex desire within a religious framework.

Equally important for Michael Field was St Teresa’s female language of the crucifix. Following Ruth Vanita’s assertion that women often depict female sexuality through floral imagery, scholars such as Roden and Cauti argue that Michael Field feminise Christ in poems such as ‘A Crucifix’ through an association with flowers.<sup>121</sup> I would add that, more fundamentally, Bradley and Cooper were actually using the mystical female language of St Teresa. Tracing Michael Field’s debt to another female poet is as vital as acknowledging their feminine reinterpretation of male homoerotic tropes. In ‘Before the Crucifix’ St Teresa addresses the image of Christ in the following way:

Let those look who will  
On rose and jasmine fair;  
On *Thee* I gaze and see  
A thousand gardens there.  
Thou Flower all seraph-bright.<sup>122</sup>

By describing the crucifix as a flower, existing among rose and jasmine, St Teresa transforms it into a virginal female figure. In ‘A Crucifix’, Bradley uses the same device:

Oh Thy Cross, O my Desire —

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<sup>120</sup> Kristeva, *Teresa, My Love: An Imagined Life of the Saint of Avila*, p. 4.

<sup>121</sup> See Ruth Vanita, *Sappho and the Virgin Mary: Same-Sex Love and the English Literary Imagination* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1996); Roden (2002); and Cauti (2007).

<sup>122</sup> St Teresa of Avila, ‘Before the Crucifix’, *Minor Works of St. Teresa: Conceptions of the Love of God, Exclamations, Maxims and Poems*, ed. by Benedict Zimmerman, trans. by the Benedictines of Stanbrook (London: Thomas Baker, 1913), p. 60.

As a lily Thou art among thorns,  
As a rose lies back against his briar.<sup>123</sup>

What is more, while St Teresa uses the metaphor of the garden to allude to the female genitalia, Bradley describes the crucifix as a ‘welcoming open fruit’, thus embracing and expanding St Teresa’s feminine description.

St Teresa’s sensual concept of *self-oblation* is also borrowed by Bradley in poems such as ‘The Five Sacred Wounds’, in which the female poet gives herself to the ambiguous Other: ‘Have compassion on me / [...] / God, for my hardness pity me!’ writes Bradley, replicating St Teresa’s ‘Lord, I am Thine, for I was born for Thee! / [...] O Bounty, showing Pity on my soul!’<sup>124</sup> Like in St Teresa, the pain of ecstasy is constantly regarded in Michael Field’s Catholic poems as ‘the grace of mystical contact’ with one another and with the transcendent God.<sup>125</sup> In ‘Purgatory’, Cooper establishes a dialogue with St Teresa’s most famous works in which the notion of self-oblation is also explored: *The Way to Perfection* (1566–1567), and *The Interior Castle* (1577). In the former, the Spanish mystic describes ways of attaining spiritual perfection through prayer and its four stages: meditation, quiet, repose of soul and perfect union with God. *The Interior Castle* presents the soul as a castle containing seven mansions or dwelling-places, which she interprets as the journey of faith through seven stages, ending with union with God. Both stanzas in Cooper’s poem ‘Purgatory’ begin with the word ‘perfection’, the first one alluding to the perfection

<sup>123</sup> Michael Field, ‘A Crucifix’, *Mystic Trees* (London: Eveleigh Nash, 1913), p. 35.

<sup>124</sup> Michael Field, ‘The Five Sacred Wounds’, *Mystic Trees* (London: Eveleigh Nash, 1913), p. 33; St Teresa of Avila, ‘Self-Oblation’, *Minor Works of St. Teresa: Conceptions of the Love of God, Exclamations, Maxims and Poems*, ed. by Benedict Zimmerman, trans. by the Benedictines of Stanbrook (London: Thomas Baker, 1913), p. 3.

<sup>125</sup> Edward Howells, ‘Early Modern Reformations’, in *The Cambridge Companion to Christian Mysticism*, ed. by Amy Hollywood and Patricia Z. Beckman (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), p. 122.

of God and the second to the perfection of one's soul. In the second stanza, the poet writes:

Perfection of my soul! —  
 How shall I reach my goal,  
 Unless I leave His Face,  
 Who is my dwelling-place,  
 [...]
 Unless, deprived of Him,  
 I may achieve Him, lie  
 His victim, sigh on sigh,  
 Bearing consummate pain,  
 Supremely to attain?<sup>126</sup>

With this exclamation, Cooper is embracing St Teresa's description of the arduous journey of the soul to attain perfection, and the supreme dwelling-place which is God, or Love, only finally gained through self-oblation: intense pain and death.

Michael Field's identification with St Teresa's sensual doctrine only intensified with their illness. Both rejected drugs (opium) to alleviate their pain because they wanted clear minds in order to continue writing, as if they were offering their own self-oblation.<sup>127</sup> M. Lynn Seitz notes that Bradley's agony 'over the suffering of her niece was intense, but of a peculiar quality that seemed to almost welcome the sacrificial torment they underwent.'<sup>128</sup> Just one month after Cooper's death, Bradley annotated in their mutual diary: 'I gave thanks for my twain — the one on the left hand & the other on the right — thanks that they died Catholic, St. Theresa's

<sup>126</sup> Michael Field, 'Purgatory', *Poems of Adoration* (London: Sands, 1912), p. 31.

<sup>127</sup> On 4 December 1913, Cooper testifies in her last entry in *Works and Days* how she refused to take drugs: 'all through my time of special prayer for clearness of mind up to the End — all through my little sacrifice of the help of poppy, [...] I had received already such marked & amazing response', quoted in *Michael Field, the Poet*, p. 295.

<sup>128</sup> M. Lynn Seitz, 'Catholic Symbol and Ritual in Minor British Poetry of the Later Nineteenth Century' (unpublished doctoral thesis, Arizona State University, 1974), p. 179.



dying thanks.’<sup>129</sup> This quotation is of twofold importance. First, it alludes to St Teresa’s self-oblation in death. Yet it may well be a reference to the crucial fact that the saint died in the arms of another female figure, Anne of St Bartholomew (1550–1626), her inseparable companion for the last five years of her life. As Anne described in her *Autobiography* (1584–1622), at the moment of her death St Teresa did not call for the priest, but the sister:

The day of her death she was unable to speak from early morning: in the evening, the Father who was attending her [...] told me to go take some nourishment. But scarcely had I left than the Saint became restless; with an anxious air she looked from one side to the other. The Father asked her if she wished me near her. She answered yes, by signs. They called me; I hastened back. As soon as she saw me, she smiled at me, showed me such condescension and affection that she caught me with her two hands and rested her head in my arms. I held her thus in my embrace until she expired.<sup>130</sup>

## Conclusion

The aesthetics of extremes — encapsulated in the state of religious ecstasy — of Spanish mysticism allowed Decadent poets to reconcile their mystical longings with their earth-bound flesh. For non-convert Decadents, like Arthur Symons, the adaptation of Spanish mystic symbolism enabled them to express a new spirituality through language. For convert authors, like Michael Field, it provided a method to reconcile the sensuous pagan poetry of their past with a still sensuous yet sacred verse. Spanish mysticism opened a newly liberating, rather than repressive, religious path. The Spanish mystics’ unique combination of paradoxes, profane and sacred love, and

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<sup>129</sup> Michael Field, *Works and Days*, British Library, Add. MS 46804, fol. 8r. The ‘twain’ Bradley refers to seems to be Edith Cooper and her younger sister, Amy (who had passed away in 1910, and was also a Catholic convert).

<sup>130</sup> Anne of St Bartholomew, *Autobiography of the Blessed Mother Anne of Saint Bartholomew*, trans. by a religious of the Carmel of St Louis (St. Louis: H.S. Collins, 1916), pp. 41–42.

homoerotic and natural imagery, contributed to Michael Field's exploration of their own identity, gender, religion and writing after their conversion. As pagan symbols had served them to express their mutual love, after their conversion the extremes of Spanish mystic doctrine and language enabled Michael Field to transform religious space into a stage for their mutual, unconditional love.

Through Spanish mysticism, Michael Field were able to create a religious, sensual language of love, which spoke of their past interest in the senses but that also surpassed bodily boundaries. By using the sexualised imagery of the Spanish mystics, and in particular the female language of St Teresa, they could dislocate their embodied self and reimagine it in spaces and forms not regularly inhabited. Like John Gray, Michael Field found in St John of the Cross peace and a means for transforming their desires. In St Teresa, they found a figure with whom they could identify. She also offered them a female and sexually ambiguous language of ecstasy and love that was both adequate and necessary for them to be able to express their unusual union in Catholic terms. In their religious verse Michael Field replicated, in Kristeva's terms, 'the extremes of being' of St Teresa: 'oscillation, flux, body and soul, flesh and word, the inception of the imaginative faculty and the ardent desire to share it.'<sup>131</sup>

Ultimately, the Decadent authors' engagement with Spanish mystic poetry also enriches our understanding of the relationship between Decadence, Catholicism and Modernism. The fact that many Decadent writers like Arthur Symons, John Gray and Michael Field were attracted to the Spanish mystics was not incidental, and nor was the Modernists' interaction (through figures like Ezra Pound, Gertrude Stein and T.S. Eliot) with Spanish mysticism.<sup>132</sup> Michael Field's later spirituality and engagement

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<sup>131</sup> Kristeva, *Teresa, My Love: An Imagined Life of the Saint of Avila*, p. 214.

<sup>132</sup> Ezra Pound makes constant references to St John of the Cross and his 'Dark Night of the Soul' in 'Canto LXXIV' and to St Teresa in 'Canto LXXXVII'; Gertrude Stein wrote the libretto for the opera

with the Spanish mystics points towards Modernism, in its experimentation with symbols, its linguistic freedom that incorporates the paradoxes of Decadence, but also in its passionate fire. Before Sackville-Vest and Stein, Michael Field had already placed St Teresa in the pantheon of religious lesbian icons. The mystical sexuality of Michael Field's Catholic verse, borrowed from Spanish mystic poetry, was at times wonderfully hyperbolic, dynamic, experimental, queer, and proto-Modernist. It certainly pointed towards a new, 'extreme' understanding of Spanish culture.

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*Four Saints in Three Acts* (1934), which features St Teresa; and T.S. Eliot's *Four Quartets* (1943) includes constant allusions to St John of the Cross's work.

## Conclusion: Aficionados of Extremes

the *aficionado*, the true *amateur*, in love with Spain  
and the Spaniards.<sup>1</sup>

Arthur Symons (1919)

On ‘the feast day of St John of the Cross’, 1917, the Spanish friar José María de Elizondo felt the need to write to his good friend, Arthur Symons: on this day of all days, ‘not writing to his devotee and friend on earth, Don Arturo, would be nothing short of mortal sin.’<sup>2</sup> Symons’ nature as a ‘devotee’ reveals an intensity that Elizondo could only respond to with facetiously hyperbolic words: not writing to Symons would be a ‘mortal sin’. It also recalls Vernon Lee’s scathing description of the French writer Maurice Barrès: a ‘devotee’ of the Spanish ‘cultus of death, damnation, tears and wounds.’<sup>3</sup> To be an admirer of Spain at the *fin de siècle* seemed to entail a degree of excess not easily understood by everyone. Spain and its culture were, indeed, not attractive to all; fascination with Spain was portrayed as a sort of cult whose devotees were the only ones capable of appreciating its extremes. Havelock Ellis warned his readers as much in *The Soul of Spain* (1908):

Spain is not an easy land to comprehend, even for intelligent visitors [...] Spain is interesting and instructive, in the highest degree fascinating for those who can learn to comprehend her, but these must always, I think, be comparatively

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<sup>1</sup> Symons, *The Symbolist Movement in Literature* (1919), p. 66.

<sup>2</sup> Father José María de Elizondo to Arthur Symons, Edinburgh, 25 November 1917, Box 24 Folder 23, Arthur Symons Papers, Department of Rare Books and Special Collections, Princeton University Library, Princeton New Jersey, USA. My transcription and translation from the Spanish: ‘Día de San Juan de la Cruz y no escribir a su devoto y amigo en la tierra, D. Arturo, sería poco menos q pecado mortal’.

<sup>3</sup> Lee, *For Maurice*, p. xviii.

few. For those few, however, the fascination is permanent and irresistible. It is a fascination not hard to justify.<sup>4</sup>

Being ‘not easy to comprehend’, Spain was then reserved for a few devotees, whose creed accorded with the peculiar singularity suggested by Ellis. In the 1937 edition of *The Soul of Spain*, Ellis added a longer preface where he noted that ‘it is easy to understand a failure to fall into sympathy with Spain and the Spaniard’ because ‘all sorts of conditions [while travelling in the country] may prove disturbing.’<sup>5</sup> Moreover, he continued, ‘the Spanish temperament is not of a nature that is easily grasped; it holds oppositions that are yet firmly welded.’<sup>6</sup> These ‘oppositions’, Ellis explained, were the friendliness and ‘disinterested human attitude’ of the Spanish people combined with their ‘hardness’ and ‘cruelty to self, and sometimes to others’.<sup>7</sup> While many may have found these Spanish extremes difficult to comprehend, there were ‘others’, he insisted, ‘on whom Spain exerts a singular fascination’.<sup>8</sup> When Vernon Lee condemned the specific characteristics she found in Spain and Spanish culture, she distanced herself from those ‘others’ described by Ellis. Lee seemed to be relying on a new generation of Decadents with a new view of aesthetics, who, as the previous chapters have discussed, did value and share a passion for Spain’s aesthetics of extremes.

The term ‘devotee’ that both Elizondo and Lee use also reminds us of the Spanish term ‘aficionado’; both words are, indeed, treated occasionally as synonyms in the English language. If a devotee is ‘zealously devoted to a particular cause’, the aficionado is an ‘ardent follower of an activity’.<sup>9</sup> Both imply, then, fervid dedication

<sup>4</sup> Ellis, *The Soul of Spain* (1908), pp. vi–vii.

<sup>5</sup> Ellis, *The Soul of Spain* (1937), p. viii.

<sup>6</sup> Ellis, *The Soul of Spain* (1937), p. ix.

<sup>7</sup> Ellis, *The Soul of Spain* (1937), p. x.

<sup>8</sup> Ellis, *The Soul of Spain* (1937), p. viii.

<sup>9</sup> *Oxford English Dictionary* [online], ‘Devotee’,

and intense enthusiasm. Aficionado, furthermore, derives from the Spanish, *afición*, or affection, which implies an emotional attachment.<sup>10</sup> Symons described himself as an ‘aficionado, as a Spaniard would say, of music-halls’ and also wrote of the French writer Prosper Mérimée that he was ‘the *aficionado*, the true *amateur*, in love with Spain and the Spaniards.’<sup>11</sup> Indeed, neither devotees nor aficionados have a professional knowledge of the activity they pursue, yet they follow it with an intensity similar to those who are ‘in love’. By acknowledging their condition as aficionados, or amateurs, Symons recognised their lack of expertise; many Decadent authors were not extraordinarily knowledgeable of Spain and its nuanced idiosyncrasies (including its plurality of regional identities) — as mentioned in the introduction, of all the authors analysed here, only Symons was fluent in the language, and only two visited the country. Yet many of these writers were committed admirers of what they perceived as being ‘Spanish’.

The distinction here is thus crucial; the aficionado and the devotee distanced themselves from the expert, one whose special knowledge causes her or him to be regarded as an authority. Symons, for instance, did not see himself as an expert on Spain: on 9 January 1899 he wrote to Yeats to explain ‘how impossible’ it would be for him ‘to write on the Spanish drama’, and suggested instead the Hispanist James Fitzmaurice-Kelly (1858–1923).<sup>12</sup> Like Mérimée, Symons was an ‘aficionado’, not an expert, of a country which he ‘adore[d] beyond all others.’<sup>13</sup> In the preface to *The Soul of Spain* (1908), Havelock Ellis also acknowledged that ‘I am well aware how

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<http://www.oed.com/view/Entry/51572?redirectedFrom=devotee> [accessed 8 September 2017].

*Oxford English Dictionary* [online], ‘Aficionado’,

<http://www.oed.com/view/Entry/3573?redirectedFrom=aficionado> [accessed 8 September 2017].

<sup>10</sup> *Oxford English Dictionary* [online], ‘Aficionado’,

<http://www.oed.com/view/Entry/3573?redirectedFrom=aficionado> [accessed 8 September 2017].

<sup>11</sup> Symons, ‘A Spanish Music-Hall’, p. 145; Symons, *The Symbolist Movement in Literature* (1919), p. 66.

<sup>12</sup> Symons, *Arthur Symons: Selected Letters*, p. 129.

<sup>13</sup> Symons, *Wanderings*, p. 48.

inadequate and superficial my attempt must appear to those among us who have devoted their lives to the study of Spain.’<sup>14</sup> In parallel to this Decadent, amateur investment in Spain and its culture, Spanish became an academic subject in Britain (in 1905 the first students took their final examinations in Spanish at Oxford). Yet for Decadent writers, Spain symbolised something else; it was not about intellect and precision, but about feelings, and extreme sensations. Adoration replaced knowledge, emotion opposed reason. This passionate rather than rational notion of Spain mirrored the Decadent aesthetic pursuit of illusion, excess and beauty, as opposed to rational thought and ordinary society. Decadents located in Spain a geocultural illustration of Wilde’s anti-materialism: that things are worth doing because they are beautiful, not because they make rational sense.

Experts align themselves with reason and objectivity, whereas devotees and aficionados are moved by passion and a certain irrationality. The expert’s position is thus at the centre of the topic studied, rather than at its extremes; the aficionado and the devotee, driven by passion, can only be located on the margins of the topic she or he adores. As aficionados and devotees of Spain, Decadent writers situated themselves at the extremes of their subject, hand-picking its most intense characteristics. Spain, with its Bataillean heterogeneous elements, appealed, indeed, to an extreme version of their Dionysian aesthetics.

This emotional rather than rational approach to and understanding of Spain was equally reflected in the responses that the country and its culture provoked. As the preceding chapters have shown, many Decadent writers became aficionados and devotees of Spain because they found in it a distinct space and culture that allowed them to experience and experiment with an aesthetics of the utmost intensity. Writing

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<sup>14</sup> Ellis, *The Soul of Spain* (1908), p. vi.

on ‘the doomed generation’, Yeats noted that ‘To give up everything but the inmost life of thought and passion, that was what my generation sought, that is why they were accursed.’<sup>15</sup> That ‘inmost life of thought and passion’ was a notion for which Spain emerged as particularly apposite: Spain exemplified and enabled extreme experimentation, offering a singular aesthetics that other geographies did not.

Even those who refused to become ‘devotees’ of Spain, like Vernon Lee, absorbed and recreated its aesthetics of extremes in their writing. In ‘The Virgin of the Seven Daggers’, Lee opposed an idealised vision of Moorish Spain with a violent Catholic country, producing a Decadent, hyperbolic tale, both in content and in style. As I uncovered in the first chapter of this thesis, Lee’s friendship with the Spanish art critic José Fernández Giménez was intense, and it determined her aesthetic thought during her youth. The country, as a whole, helped her ‘whole life with its ironical paradox, its hyperbolic, “all or nothing” Quixotry’.<sup>16</sup> Lee was not a devotee of Spain, and yet the country’s extremes permeated her thinking and her writing.

Oscar Wilde, along with many of his contemporaries, was an aficionado of one of the most prominent representatives of the Spanish school of painting, Diego Velázquez. In doing so, he displayed a preference, in Lee’s words, for ‘the black and white bony essentials of things’ rather than for ‘their pink and juicy pulpiness’, as in the works of Rubens.<sup>17</sup> Wilde was equally devoted to the artificiality, abnormality and excess of the Spanish court that Velázquez depicted. Informed by this Spanish aesthetics of extremes, Wilde’s ‘The Birthday of the Infanta’ resembles Lee’s ‘The Virgin of the Seven Daggers’ in its disturbing effect, its hyperbolic irony and excessiveness. This *Spanish* Decadent short fiction reveals the determining literary

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<sup>15</sup> Yeats, ‘Lecture Notes for “Friends of My Youth”’, p. 69.

<sup>16</sup> Lee, *The Sentimental Traveller*, p. ix.

<sup>17</sup> Lee, *The Sentimental Traveller*, p. ix.



effect of Spanish aesthetics: Spain's role is not only inspirational for Decadent writing but it actively shaped it; the literature that engaged with Spain exhibited excessive and unsettling qualities. Other examples of British *fin-de-siècle* short fiction set in Spain which display similar disturbing and extreme effects and are worth of further study include Robert Louis Stevenson's (1850–1894) 'Ollala' (1885); Gabriela Cunningham Graham's (1858–1906) 'The Christ of Toro' (1897), and Charlotte Mew's (1869–1928) 'A White Night' (1903).<sup>18</sup>

Arthur Symons, the foremost Hispanophile examined in this thesis, underwent unique and, at times, life-changing experiences in Spain. When he came back from his second trip to Spain, on 4 April 1899, Symons wrote to his future wife Rhoda Bowser about the novelty of his experience: 'It has been a new life to me, I cannot tell you how interesting and how varied.'<sup>19</sup> As we have seen in chapter three, Spain emerged as a new, revelatory experience in Symons' letters, poems and essays. In Montserrat, for instance, Symons was 'moved to astonishment' and formed a 'new kind of sentiment' that he had 'never felt before'.<sup>20</sup> In the pilgrims he met in Montserrat, he found 'the only perfectly sympathetic company I have ever found about me in travelling', because, with them, life was 'reduced to its extreme simplicity'.<sup>21</sup> For

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<sup>18</sup> In Stevenson's 'Ollala' (first published in the Christmas 1885 issue of *The Court and Society Review*), a young British soldier wounded during the Peninsular War is sent to recuperate in an isolated Spanish mansion. There he falls in love with Olalla, the beautiful daughter of a decaying aristocratic family. She seems to return his love but decides that they can never be together. The narrator suggests that Olalla's mother is a vampire of some sort and that Olalla fears that she, in time, will also become a vampire.

In 'The Christ of Toro' (first published in April 1897 in *The Yellow Book*), Gabriela Cunningham Graham recounts the eerie story of a painting of Christ nailed to the cross in a Castilian monastery during the reign of Philip II.

In 'A White Night' (published in May 1903 in *Temple Bar*), Mew describes the ritual burying alive of a Spanish nun by monks in 1876 from the point of view of an Englishman who, together with her wife and his brother, witnessed the incident unnoticed. In the introduction to *Daughters of Decadence*, Elaine Showalter describes this story as 'the darkest of all [the] stories [included in the collection]'. *Daughters of Decadence: Women Writers of the Fin de Siècle*, ed. by Elaine Showalter (London: Virago, 1993), p. xviii.

<sup>19</sup> Beckson, *Arthur Symons: A Life*, p. 182.

<sup>20</sup> Symons, 'Montserrat', *Cities and Sea-Coasts and Islands*, p. 125.

<sup>21</sup> Symons, 'Montserrat', p. 124.

once, he added, ‘I was perfectly happy, and with that element of strangeness in my happiness without which I cannot conceive happiness.’<sup>22</sup> In the south of Spain, Symons delighted in the intense duality of women who possessed, for him, a ‘cold ardour, which is the utmost refinement of fire.’<sup>23</sup> Seville, ‘more than any city’ he had ‘ever seen’, was ‘the city of pleasure’, and at the same time it wove religion into its life with the most ‘spectacular appeal’: ‘Nowhere as in Spain does one so realise the sacred drama of the Mass’.<sup>24</sup> For Symons, the Spanish people lived ‘with an eager, remote, perfectly well-bred life, as of people who could never be taken unawares, in a vulgar or trivial moment.’<sup>25</sup> When Symons underscored this lack of vulgarity and triviality in Spanish everyday life, he was evoking the Decadent — Paterian — pursuit of the fleeting moment and eagerness to transfigure the commonplace present.

Above all, Symons was bewitched by the vigour of Spanish flamenco, where he recognised an elementality and ‘eternal’ condition that he linked to the Decadent and the Symbolist movements, and which anticipated the Spanish Modernist Federico García Lorca’s (1898–1936) notion of *Duende*, or the spirit of evocation.<sup>26</sup> This ‘elemental’ condition that Symons perceived in Spanish flamenco is also attached to the notion of the aficionado: paradoxically *immaterial* sensation — the spirit or element of art — prevails over reason.

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<sup>22</sup> Symons, ‘Montserrat’, *Cities and Sea-Coasts and Islands*, p. 125.

<sup>23</sup> Symons, ‘Seville’, p. 15.

<sup>24</sup> Symons, ‘Seville’, p. 3; p. 20–21.

<sup>25</sup> Symons, ‘A Study of Toledo’, p. 55.

<sup>26</sup> Lorca first developed the aesthetics of *Duende* in a lecture he gave in Buenos Aires in 1933, entitled ‘Juego y teoría del duende’ [‘Play and Theory of the Duende’]. Four elements can be isolated in Lorca’s vision of duende: irrationality, earthiness, a heightened awareness of death, and a dash of the diabolical. For more on Lorca and the notion of *duende* see, for example, Federico García Lorca, *In Search of Duende*, ed. and trans. by Christopher Maurer (New York: New Directions, 1998).

Havelock and Edith Ellis, with whom Symons often travelled in Spain, underwent similarly transformational experiences to that of Symons.<sup>27</sup> Their reception of Spain, although beyond the remit of this thesis, opens new avenues for the study of the links between Decadents abroad and sexuality. Havelock and Edith Ellis recorded, in their writing, a similar awareness of Spanish intensity; they also encountered a country where new and paramount sensations were feasible. Havelock Ellis, who had travelled assiduously to Spain since the 1890s, narrated in the 1937 edition of *The Soul of Spain* the ‘supreme experience of [...] freedom’ he felt in his first trip to Spain with Symons in 1891.<sup>28</sup> In the book, originally published in 1908, Ellis was committed to unearthing the ‘soul’ of the country, as he was convinced that what made Spain unique was its ‘eternal attitude of the human spirit’: emotion before reason.<sup>29</sup>

Also notable is Edith Ellis’ response to Spain, recorded only in her short story ‘Dolores’ (written in 1899 but published in 1909). As mentioned in chapter three, in the story, the Englishwoman protagonist, Ju, felt an intense array of emotions watching a Spanish Gypsy woman dancing: ‘Never, even in church, she thought, had she felt so rested, so uplifted as now [...] for the first time in her life she saw passion, grace, joy and vigor’.<sup>30</sup> Edith Ellis’ ‘Dolores’ is particularly noteworthy for, as Regenia Gagnier points out, ‘capturing the boredom of middle-class women’.<sup>31</sup> It also reveals a new sexually liberating dimension. Married to Havelock Ellis, Edith Ellis was a lesbian — she provided the material for one of her husband’s few female case

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<sup>27</sup> As mentioned in the third chapter of this thesis, Symons travelled with Havelock Ellis on his first trip to Spain in 1891. On his second trip to Spain, he joined Havelock Ellis and his wife Edith in the south of Spain in November 1898.

<sup>28</sup> Ellis, *The Soul of Spain* (1937), p. vii.

<sup>29</sup> Ellis, *The Soul of Spain* (1908), p. viii.

<sup>30</sup> Ellis, ‘Dolores’, p. 126.

<sup>31</sup> Gagnier, *Individualism, Decadence and Globalization*, p. 83.

studies in *Sexual Inversion* (1897). In 'Dolores', Edith Ellis narrates a brief lesbian encounter between the Englishwoman and the Spanish Gypsy dancer:

The two men went to settle accounts with the manager at the door, and the Englishwoman and the dancing girl were left alone. They turned and faced each other; with a mutual impulse they sought each other's eyes, and each felt in the other's look the inevitableness of her lot as a woman. No dancing for Dolores, no husband's care for Ju, could alter that — the tragedy which lurks unseen, and sooner or later crushes women in the stronghold of the emotions. It was a moment's revelation, and Ju and the dancer were for an instant one in a mutual comprehension of forces. The two women kissed in silence, their eyes lowered before the sorrow they had caught in each other's faces.<sup>32</sup>

In this intense and intimate instant, two women from different nationalities and backgrounds became 'one in a mutual comprehension of forces'; intensity overcame nationality. Indeed, Edith Ellis' 'Dolores', with her description of a Spanish Gypsy woman; Vernon Lee's 'The Virgin of the Seven Daggers', with her Catholic Spanish Virgin and her Moorish princess; Charlotte Mew's 'A White Night', with her Spanish nun; and Michael Field's poetry informed by St Teresa's work all seem revealing examples for further studies on the connections between female homosexuality, Decadence and place.

As seen in chapter four, many male Decadent authors, including Arthur Symons and John Gray, were drawn to Spanish mystic poetry. Yet it was Michael Field who most prominently reflected the ardour of Spanish mystical verse, especially that of St Teresa, in their later religious poetry. The extremes of Spanish mystic doctrine as a whole allowed many Decadent poets to reconcile their mystical longings with their earth-bound flesh, after the stale environment created by the Oscar Wilde trials. In the case of Michael Field, the sexualised imagery of the Spanish mystics, and

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<sup>32</sup> Ellis, 'Dolores', p. 128.

in particular the ecstatic, female language of St Teresa, enabled them to transform religious space into a stage for their love.

As a final note pointing towards the future, it is necessary to stress the relevance of the Decadent interest in and understanding of Spain to subsequent literary responses to the country. Indeed, Spanish culture took a prominent place in the British imaginary at the end of the nineteenth century that would only intensify during the twentieth century. As mentioned in chapter four, the Decadent fascination with Spanish mysticism's intensity foretells the ensuing Modernist investment in this topic: Ezra Pound, T.S. Eliot, Gertrude Stein, and Georges Bataille would all recuperate and treat Spanish mysticism in their work. Beyond mysticism, the Decadent approach to Spain as a whole — an intensified reception and reproduction of the country and its culture — promoted a vision that was prominent in some later twentieth-century Modernist schools of writing. Spain occupied a prominent place in Surrealism's concentration on emotion, sensuality and instinct — some of the main representatives of the movements were, indeed, Spanish, and many other French and British Surrealists drew on Spanish excess in their art. Spain also symbolised the emphasis on the primordial and the importance of the unconscious that the Decadents foreshadowed and the Modernists developed. British Modernists, who often underrated their Decadent predecessors' work, inherited much of their amateur appreciation for Spanish aesthetics.

As an illustrative example, in her essay 'To Spain' (1923), one of the pivotal figures of British Modernism, Virginia Woolf, established a dialogue with one of the champions of British Decadence, Arthur Symonds. For Woolf, the dramatic aesthetics of Spain were at the core of this imaginary conversation:

You, who cross the Channel yearly, probably no longer see the house at Dieppe, no longer feel, as the train moves slowly down the street, one civilization fall, another raise [...] the disembodied spirit fluttering at the window desires above all things to be admitted to the new society where the houses are painted in lozenges of pale pink and blue; women wear shawls; trousers are baggy; there are crucifixes on hill-tops; yellow mongrel dogs; chairs in the street; cobbles — gaiety, frivolity, drama, in short.<sup>33</sup>

Woolf's 'disembodied spirit' echoes Symons' infamous definition of literary Decadence: to be 'a disembodied voice, and yet the voice of a human soul.'<sup>34</sup> The allusion to Dieppe, France, is also revealing. This French port on the English Channel was a popular destination among Decadent writers in the 1890s, including Symons. Narrating the impressions of a British passenger on their train journey to Spain through France, Woolf evoked that particular fascination with Spain that emerged in Britain at the turn of the nineteenth century — primarily via France. The 'disembodied spirit' of the Decadents, Woolf seemed to say, left Britain for France and landed in Spain, longing for aesthetic intensity. Woolf's choice of words is also revealing. The pale pink and blue palette, the shawls, the crucifixes, and the hybrid yellowness speak of a Spain where there is light, symbol, ritual, death, decay, and, above all, drama and excess: an aesthetics of extremes.

Ezra Pound, who arrived in London in 1908 from Gibraltar with his 'beard cut to a point to resemble a Spanish conquistador', insistently derided Decadence in his work, but considered Symons to be one of his 'gods' and shared with him a passion for Spanish culture.<sup>35</sup> Both authors had undergone intense, formative experiences in Spain that played a decisive role in the radicalism of their work: Symons in 1891, as

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<sup>33</sup> Virginia Woolf, 'To Spain', in *The Essays of Virginia Woolf, 1919-1924*, 6 vols (London: Hogarth Press, 1988), iii, p. 361.

<sup>34</sup> Arthur Symons, 'The Decadent Movement in Literature', p. 859.

<sup>35</sup> John Tytell, *Ezra Pound: The Solitary Volcano* (Anchor Press: New York, 1987), p. 5; G. Thomas Tanselle, 'Two Early Letters of Ezra Pound', *American Literature*, 34:1 (1962), 114–119 (p. 118).

demonstrated in this thesis, and Pound in 1906.<sup>36</sup> Pound's Spanish studies at the University of Pennsylvania and the project for a thesis on Lope de Vega led him to the Spanish National Library in Madrid in 1906. In Madrid, he was helped by Father Elizondo, with whom he struck up a friendship after the priest helped him obtain permission to study other manuscripts. Father Elizondo, also a close friend of Symons, is the same Spanish friar mentioned at the beginning of this conclusion. It thus does not come as a surprise to note that, when Pound described the remnants of the *fin-de-siècle* spirit in his 'Canto LXXXI', he did so through Spanish imagery and the Spanish language: the excessive condition of Spanish Catholicism, Sargent and his fascination with Spain and Velázquez, and Father José Elizondo, his mutual friend with Symons:

And he said: “Hay aquí mucho catolicismo—(sounded  
catol*i*thismo  
y muy poco reliHion.”  
and he said: “Yo creo que los reyes desaparecen”  
(Kings will, I think, disappear)  
This was Padre José Elizondo  
in 1906 and in 1917  
or about 1917  
and Dolores said: “Come pan, niño,” eat bread, me lad  
Sargent had painted her  
before he descended  
(i.e. if he descended  
but in those days he did thumb sketches,  
impressions of the Velázquez in the Museo del Prado<sup>37</sup>

Woolf and Pound's texts gesture towards a recognisable Spanish aesthetics that was shaped by a previous generation — a notion of Spain bequeathed by Decadence. Woolf's 'disembodied spirit fluttering at the window', who 'desires above all things

<sup>36</sup> David Ten Eyck writes of Pound that ‘it is clear that his 1906 trip to Spain was a crucial formative experience [...] The records that survive from this time are marked by a sense of discovery that is both literary and personal’. David Ten Eyck, ‘Romance Languages’, in *Ezra Pound in Context* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), ed. by Ira B. Nadel, p. 48.

<sup>37</sup> Ezra Pound, 'Canto LXXXI', *Selected Cantos* (London: Faber & Faber, 1967), p. 83.

to be admitted to the new society where [...] there are crucifixes on hill-tops' also implies devotion, like that of a devotee, of an aficionado. The perceived extreme tendencies of Spain and its culture, became, indeed, a penchant for many Decadent writers. Yet Spanish aesthetics represented something more than just an interest: it actively impinged upon Decadent writing. There was a reciprocal dynamic; Spanish aesthetics and Decadence fed one another and were mutually reinforcing. Spain cannot be thus read in isolation as a complement to British Decadence, but as fundamental to its literature. Decadents found intense artistic possibility in the Spanish aesthetics of extremes.



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